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The book cover features a dark, textured background. At the top, a landscape scene with a body of water and a distant ship is visible. Below this, two figures in full plate armor stand symmetrically on either side of the title. They are holding long, straight swords vertically. The armor is detailed with red and gold accents. The title 'THE PRINCESS THORA' is written in a large, stylized, light-colored serif font. Below the title, the author's name 'HARRIS BURLAND' is written in a smaller, similar font. At the bottom, a decorative, symmetrical scrollwork element with red and gold patterns frames the lower part of the cover.

THE PRINCESS THORA

HARRIS
BURLAND

1. No subject

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The Princess Thora ●







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The Princess Thora

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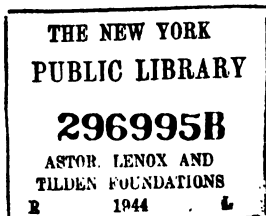
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Boston
Little, Brown, and Company

1904

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Published October, 1904

TYPOGRAPHY BY BURR PRINTING HOUSE
NEW YORK, U. S. A.

PRESSWORK BY THE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Illustrations

“I looked for a moment, then fell upon my knees”	<i>Frontispiece</i>
“We saw with surprise that he was a European”	<i>Page 103</i>
“I thought I could see the slender figure of a boy cowering in front of them”	“ 187
“ ‘This is the place, Sir Thule de Brie,’ he cried ”	“ 274



PREFACE

BY SIR JOHN CORDEAUX

IT is now some ten years since the *Silex Expedition* left England to discover the North Pole, and though fresh interest has been directed to it from time to time by relief expeditions, and more recently by the publication of the will of Dr. Silex, yet the cursory reader of the newspapers may be glad to have his memory strengthened by a recital of the main facts.

Dr. Silex was an intimate friend of my own, and I feel that it is my duty both to him and to the readers of the extraordinary story I have now to make public, to first of all give some description of the character and personality of a very remarkable man.

In 1890—a year before the Expedition left England—Dr. Silex was best known to the world as a man of vast wealth, and to his friends and acquaintances as one whose whole life from boyhood had been devoted to the study and purchase of rare books. All his ideas of beauty and happiness were confined to the four walls of his magnificent library. He had never, so far as I know, been in love with a woman, nor had he ever been heard to express admiration for a beautiful face. He was content to read about the other sex, and kept his real affections and hatreds for the characters depicted in his books. His world was peopled with the creations of other minds, and he would not hear a word against the ones he loved. If anyone had hinted to him that Juliet was a silly, lovesick wench, the discussion might have ended in blows. But

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even in this case Juliet was to him always the Juliet of the early Folios and Quartos—a goddess enthroned in a perfect shrine—and perhaps if he had only made her acquaintance in a shilling edition of the play, he would have scarcely troubled to defend her.

Yet Edward Silex was a man who, if he had ever been taken out of his narrow world of books, would have made his mark on the lives of his generation.

Physically, he was tall, lean and broad-shouldered, and he would have passed for an athlete—which, indeed, he was in his boyhood—if it had not been for the slight stoop in his shoulders, which spoke of years of study and a sedentary life. His clean-shaven features were sensitive and finely cut, but there was a quiet determination about his keen grey eyes and the lines of his mouth that removed any suspicion of weakness from his face. It gave one the impression that he might be weak about trifles, but that in matters of moment he would exhibit a will quite foreign to the character of his every-day life. His occupation, however, gave no opportunity for the display of any such power. The events of his life were very trivial, and most of his difficulties were scarcely worth troubling about.

Intellectually, his mind was more keen than powerful. In his own particular line he was one of the first authorities in Europe. Men old enough to be his father were accustomed, in certain matters, to yield to the mere weight of his name, and a great university had recognised his extraordinary powers of research by making him an honorary Doctor of Civil Law. He had a marvellous memory, and his powers of discernment amounted almost to an instinct. No book-dealer ever dared to offer him a volume with a missing page. He would merely open the book at half a dozen places, and one of them would be sure to disclose the loss. His knowledge of human nature was limited, but exact within those limits. He knew the hearts and minds of book-dealers as though their lives had been printed on

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one of the pages of their own books. No artifice was hidden from him, and no change of expression escaped his notice. He knew to a nicety how far each man would conscientiously depart from the truth, and how far each man's price might be beaten down.

Dr. Silex read much, and had more than a superficial knowledge of every subject he read about, and a complete grasp of many of them. He knew more law than many barristers, more medicine than a good many doctors, and more theology than half the curates in London. If he had devoted his mind to the learning of a single profession, he would undoubtedly have risen to great eminence, for he had that power of arranging facts, and sifting evidence, and weighing theories, which makes for distinction in every branch of life.

But here again he was cramped by the narrow sphere of his ambitions. And, indeed, it seemed as though his will, his body, and his intellect had all been stunted by his surroundings. He had the makings of a magnificent man, but he was merely a pedant, wasting his physical strength in hours of useless study, and his intellect in the pursuit of useless knowledge. A man of his wealth and talent might have safely flung himself into the arena of politics, where his powers would have been so quickened in the conflict that he would soon have borne no more resemblance to his old self than the lion bears to the domestic cat.

The following incident will show how the keen devotion to any one subject may destroy all sense of proportion in a man's mind, and how ludicrous the man can become, if that subject is of a trivial character. It also, as I now realise, had considerable bearing on the events which followed it.

One day in June I called on Dr. Silex after lunch and found him positively miserable. He was standing at the window when I entered, and I noticed a deep frown on his forehead.

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"Well, Sillex," I said heartily, "how are you? I just called in on my way to the club to borrow your pamphlet on 'Compositors in the 18th Century.' I am going to meet a man who thinks himself an authority. I can read up all I want in the cab. I don't know much about that period myself—uninteresting, I call it. You look pretty black—what crime are you meditating, eh?"

"Haven't you heard about Budlip?" he said gloomily.

"No, not dead, is he?" I asked in some alarm.

"Dead," replied Dr. Sillex savagely, "of course not—unless he has died of happiness. Sit down and have a cigarette, and I'll tell you all about it."

I sat down and lit the cigarette which he offered me. "Well," I said, "I am ready."

"It's simply this," he said, "Budlip has bought a Mazarin Bible for a mere song. I had his letter this morning. The pieces are in the waste-paper basket."

"Lucky chap, Budlip."

"That's one way of looking at it. I call it disgusting. I have been looking out for a copy for seven years. None of the known copies are likely to come into the market. I have been hoping to discover a fresh one. And now, Budlip—well, I'd rather anyone but Budlip had found it."

I leant back in my chair and laughed heartily. Dr. Sillex frowned more deeply than ever, and puffed vigorously at his cigarette.

"You seem amused," he said coldly.

"I am amused," I replied; "I have no copy of the Mazarin Bible myself, but I still see some prospects in life."

"You don't collect Bibles," he answered bitterly. "Everyone in Europe knows that you have made a specialty of the Early Classics, and that you are the first living authority on the subject. Of course you don't care. You are selfish, like all specialists."

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I laughed again and rose from my chair. "Where's that book I wanted?" I said. Silex searched in a drawer of one of the tables, and handed a pamphlet to me. I took it and laid one hand on his arm.

"Do you know, Silex," I said, seriously, "that I am very anxious about you, and I want to give you some advice. You will believe that I am your friend."

"You are my only friend, Cordeaux," he answered.

"Well," I continued, "if you will take my advice, you will sell every book you have and go out from the seclusion of this library into the strife of the world. Go in for law, medicine, politics, anything but this. Shoot big game in Africa. Try to climb inaccessible mountains. Make an attempt to reach the capital of Thibet. Do anything but this! It doesn't suit you. You want bracing up. I can see you're a fighting man by your jaw, and you've sunk to the level of a tame rabbit. Go out into the world and get some blows, and I reckon you'll give as good as you get. I'd rather see you digging potatoes in a field than fussing about Budlip and his Bible. It is well enough for me, but I'm fifteen years older than you, and had done most of my hard work at your age."

"Thank you, Cordeaux," he replied, with flushed cheeks and a dangerous sparkle in his eye, "the life suits me very well, and I think you will confess I have made some name for myself already."

"Name, name!" I cried; "yes, you have made a name, but what have you done for yourself, for your country, for the world? A lot of responsibility lies on your shoulders. A man like you should devote his wealth and talents to something great. But I mustn't preach, Silex, and I must absolutely go. Good day," and I left him, half amused and half indignant at his childishness.

This apparently trifling incident, which had almost passed out of my memory, has now assumed an importance which justifies its narration, for if Professor Budlip had

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not written that letter, it is probable that Dr. Sillex would still be buried in his library at Hanbury House.

Two days, however, after this incident, I was astounded to hear that he himself discovered another fresh copy of the Mazarin Bible, and a month after that I was positively dumbfounded to read in the papers that Dr. Sillex, the bookworm and bibliophile, was going to spend a million pounds on an expedition to the North Pole. But an extraordinary change came over him at this time, and I began to flatter myself that my words had sunk deeply into his mind. From a quiet student he became a bustling man of action, and threw all his physical and mental energies into the manifold arrangements of the expedition.

It was, as most people remember, of enormous size, consisting of no less than twenty ships and one thousand men. It sailed on April 3rd, 1891, and, in spite of all our arguments and entreaties, Dr. Sillex himself sailed with it. It reached St. John's, Newfoundland, on April 13th, and remained there a week. Then it left amid a scene of great enthusiasm. I read in the *Daily Telegraph* that as the fleet moved slowly down the harbour, the captain and Dr. Sillex were plainly seen on the bridge of the *Aurora*, waving their caps. Then a reporter described how they became mere specks as the distance increased, and how in an hour's time the ships themselves were only dots on the horizon, and the great Sillex expedition passed out of the world of civilisation.

A month later, a Danish boat from Godhaven arrived in St. John's, and reported that she had passed through the fleet in lat. $53^{\circ} 40''$ N. and long. $56^{\circ} 20''$ W., and a month afterwards the Trömso, from Upernavik, said that the lookout-man on the mast had seen a few ships on the horizon in lat. $70^{\circ} 10''$ N. long. $58^{\circ} 15''$ W. Not long after that we heard from both Godhaven and Upernavik that the fleet had called at these places, and many people had letters from their friends and relations. But Dr. Sillex

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did not write me a single line, or if he did, the letter never reached me.

After that there was no more news of any description. The fleet had apparently passed beyond the tracks of all vessels and disappeared into the lonely silence of the Polar Seas.

A year passed, and no word or sign came from the North to enlighten the world as to the fate of the expedition. Under ordinary circumstances this would have occasioned no surprise, and certainly no anxiety in the minds of the explorers' relatives. It was fairly certain that the fleet would have to spend at least two winters in the ice.

There was, however, one circumstance which might well bring terror to the hearts of all those who watched and waited for the return of the ships, and scientists gravely shook their heads as they pondered over maps of the Polar Sea, and jotted down certain calculations on paper. On July 15th, 1892, as some may well remember, the whole of the northern part of Europe, Asia and America was visited by one of the most terrible and destructive earthquakes that has ever been recorded in the history of the world. The loss of life indeed was, considering the enormous area affected, comparatively small, for, with the exception of a few towns in Russia, the countries in the line of the disturbance were either totally uninhabited or only thinly populated with a few wandering tribes of Esquimaux and Samoyads. But the physical effects of the shock were enormous. Lakes and valleys were filled up, rivers turned from their courses, great mountains levelled into square miles of rock-strewn plain, and in the lonely tundras of Siberia a mountain of mud 1,000 feet in height, was cast up from the level wastes by some stupendous subterranean force.

Nor did the seas escape the general disturbance of nature. A huge tidal wave swept from the North and bore the ice down the Davis and Behring Straits as far as

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the thirtieth degree of latitude, while the Northern shores of Siberia and America were heaped up fifty feet high with gigantic floes and bergs. The movement of the ocean was felt all over the world, and the tidal wave was said to have reached the Northern shores of Australia.

It was not strange that considerable anxiety was felt about the Silex expedition. Whether the ships were in open water or imprisoned in the ice, they must have inevitably perished in so gigantic an upheaval, if they had been in the line of destruction. But, as one scientist pointed out, it was, of course, quite possible that they had been outside the track of the seismic wave. Its path was very irregular, and it was noticed that places a few miles from some striking evidence of the earthquake's power had been absolutely unaffected. So much so that in Siberia the town of Alaikha had scarcely been shaken by a faint tremor, while a neighbouring village had been so completely levelled to the ground that no trace of it existed. Moreover, several Arctic explorers said that it was quite possible that the ships had been securely sheltered from the North by the rocky bulwarks of some deep fiord, and that they might have escaped with a severe shock, while perhaps two miles away from them in the open straits nothing could have lived among the whirling blocks of ice. However, there was grave cause for uneasiness, and many people confidently expressed an opinion that not a man of the expedition would ever be seen again.

This opinion was justified. Another year passed, and still another, and the North refused to divulge its secret. The ships were provisioned for five years, and six months before the expiration of that time an American millionaire equipped two vessels to go in search of them. Two years afterwards these ships returned, having thoroughly explored Grant Land, Grinnell Land and the North of Greenland. They reported that they had discovered many evidences of the visit of the ships on the coast of Grant

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Land. Half-a-dozen broken boats, piles of empty tins, part of a rifle, and whole cart loads of odds and ends, such as men leave behind them after a prolonged stay in a place. But not a sign of a wreck or the remains of a human being.

The result of this relief expedition was doubtful. Optimists said that, if the one thousand men and twenty ships had been destroyed, it would scarcely be possible to explore so limited an area without finding some trace of the expedition. The broken boats meant nothing. It was easy to lose a boat, or still easier to be obliged to abandon one.

Pessimists, on the other hand, said that if the men had been alive, and the ships afloat, it would have been impossible to explore so limited an area without encountering at least one ship, and they gave it as their opinion that the earthquake of 1892 had so overwhelmed the whole expedition that all traces of them were, perhaps, one hundred feet beneath the ice.

And so the state of uncertainty was intensified, and up to the beginning of this year women watched with white faces and sick hearts, and looked at the North with pleading eyes as though asking it either to give up its dead or send their dear ones back to them. And men went out and risked their lives to explore the Arctic regions and rescue their fellows from the white tomb of the Polar seas. But both women waited and men explored in vain.

Then at last all hope was abandoned, and the men were written off the books of civilisation as dead. Their relatives assumed mourning, and the world forgot. In the last book relating to Polar Exploration it is stated that the Silex Expedition was probably overwhelmed by the great earthquake of 1892.

On March 20th of this year I broke up the establishment at Hanbury House. For ten years the housekeeper had ruled the servants with a rod of iron, abating none of her

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punctiliousness and precision by reason of her master's absence. For ten summers the roses in the garden had flowered and faded in all their accustomed splendour, and for ten winters the fire had blazed cheerfully in the great library, and the books were aired and dusted with a regularity absolutely unknown when the Doctor himself had been in the house.

But on this date I published the will of Dr. Sillex to the world. It was, in effect, a deed of gift. It required no proof of death. It simply provided that, if nothing was heard of him for ten years, his property should be disposed of absolutely in the way he prescribed. The provisions of the will are probably fresh in the memory of everyone who takes an interest in the legacies of rich men. He handsomely provided for the housekeeper and all the other servants. He left Hanbury House, with all its contents, including the magnificent library, to me, Sir John Cordeaux, and I have taken up my residence there. A house and estate of ten thousand acres in Cumberland, which had been in his family for fourteen generations, was left to a second cousin, John Sillex. The residue of the estate, amounting to over one million and a half of money, and inherited by Dr. Sillex from his mother, the sole heiress of an American millionaire, was left in trust in perpetuity, the annual income to be applied for the benefit of the labouring classes of his own county.

On the mountains of Cumberland John Sillex reared a stately pillar of white marble, which gleams in the sun like snow, and is visible from half the county. At the base he has placed an inscription recording that it had been erected to the memory of one who had given his life in the pursuit of knowledge, and his wealth for the good of his fellow-men. And in many towns and villages throughout the land there are other monuments, less noble in size and design, but perhaps erected in a spirit of deeper sorrow. Some were of stone, some mere crosses of wood, but be-

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neath none of them lie the bodies of the men whose names they bear.

This much of the *Silex Expedition* is known to many of you already. It now only remains for me to tell you how the extraordinary narrative which I have edited for your perusal came into my possession.

One evening towards the end of September I was sitting in the library of Hanbury House and enjoying a cigar after dinner. It was a raw night, and I was glad to sit near the fire. I am a bachelor. On this evening I had no companions but two wire-haired terriers, who had curled themselves up to the fender as close as possible. My thoughts had turned to Dr. Silex, and indeed it was hardly possible to help thinking of him in the room where for so many years he had lived out his studious, quiet life. The very place breathed of him, and, apart from the fact of his magnificent gift to me, I was reminded of him by almost everything I set my eyes upon. I began to wonder, as I often did, whether he was really dead or whether by some miracle he had escaped the terrible cataclysm of 1892. It was strange, I thought to myself, that not a single wreck had been discovered by the relief expedition. Twenty ships had disappeared, as though the earth had swallowed them up.

My meditations were interrupted by a footman, who said that a man wished to see me, and that he was waiting in the hall. From the servant's description, I gathered that he was a rough sort of fellow, and that he had something to deliver to me. I gave orders for him to be admitted. When he entered, I saw at a glance, from his clothes and walk, that he was a sailor. His face was tanned to a mahogany colour and pitted with smallpox. He wore a small tuft of grizzled hair on his chin, which was otherwise clean shaven. Under his arm he held a curious object which looked like a six-inch shell.

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"Well, my man," I said, rising to my feet, and quieting the dogs, who barked and growled furiously.

"Are you Sir John Cordeaux?" the man said, respectfully.

"I am," I replied.

"This is for you, then," he said, and he handed me the object under his arm. I took hold of it in both hands and examined it carefully. It was conical at both ends and made of some metal, probably steel. It was perfectly black, and covered with dents and ridges, as though it had been subjected to tremendous blows, and some steady pressure that had scraped long furrows in its surface. I turned it over and over, and looked at the man inquiringly.

"Where did you get it?" I said, "and how do you know it is for me?"

"I am the captain of the *Ardilaun*, a Dundee whaler, sir. We spent last winter icebound off the coast of Spitzbergen. We came across this, sir, shortly after the ice broke up. It was floating in a small piece of open water."

"But why did you bring it to me?" I asked.

"If you look at it more closely, sir," he replied, "you will see. Hold it sideways to the light; there's something written on it, though the ice has scraped it down pretty clean."

I held it to the light and turned it round slowly. Then I saw a few faint marks on the metal which suggested an inscription. I looked at them again, and made out some letters, one by one. They formed the following sentence:

"Whoever will take this to Sir John Cordeaux, Hanbury House, London, England, will receive £500 reward." I took quite five minutes to puzzle this out; then I looked up at the man with a quick glance of suspicion.

"I can read it," I said, "but I really do not know if it is worth £500. It may be a fraud, or even the work of a practical joker."

"I know nothing of it," the man answered, "except what

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I have told you, sir," and he looked me squarely and honestly in the face.

"It might be worth £500 to me," I said, making an effort to be calm, though the metal case trembled in my hands; "on the other hand, it might not be worth five pence."

The man scratched his head, and looked as though he were trying to grasp my view of the case.

"It seems as though there were somethin' in what you say, sir," he said, after a pause. "Yet finding it where we did, above the Arctic Circle, and knowing when I got home, from the papers, as how you were a great friend of Dr. Sillex, it occurred to me that it might be from him."

"Well, look here," I answered, only too anxious to get rid of him and open the case, "if it is from Dr. Sillex and contains any news of the expedition, I will give you the £500. If it is nothing of interest to me, I will give you ten pounds for your trouble."

"Very good, sir."

"Call again to-morrow," I said, "about twelve o'clock. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir," he replied, and left the room. When he had gone, I rang the bell and again examined the metal casket. It appeared to me to be made in two pieces, one fitting on the other like the lid of a box, and both soldered together in the middle. When the footman entered, I told him to bring some files, a chisel and a hammer.

In a few minutes he returned, and then I set to work to crack this nut of steel and extricate the kernel. It was hard work, and when at last I managed to loosen one piece from the other, the clock was striking twelve. Trembling with excitement, I drew out the contents, a hard, bulky cylinder wrapped in oiled silk. I quickly tore off this covering and smoothed out a thick roll of manuscript. I glanced eagerly at the writing and gave a cry of pleasure. The captain of the *Ardilaun* had earned his £500. The

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manuscript contained more than three hundred pages of close writing, inscribed on some fine, transparent material like gold-beaters' skin, and all of it was in the handwriting of Dr. Silex.

I threw myself into a chair and commenced to read. It was not till five o'clock in the morning that I finished the last page. I had kept the fire burning brightly in the grate before me, but, as I made my way up to my room, I shivered as though I had been handling a block of ice.

The following is the narrative, given word for word as Dr. Silex wrote it. I publish it to the world without further comment.

CHAPTER I

THE MAZARIN BIBLE

I CANNOT give you any clear and complete account of the events that have happened since I last saw you, Cordeaux, without reverting to matters which happened some time before I left England.

On the 12th of June, 1890—I have good reason to remember the date—I was sitting by myself in my library at Hanbury House, and as miserable as I then imagined a man could be. It would seem hard, as you know, for a lover of books to be unhappy in that room. The very walls were cased with books from floor to ceiling. Revolving bookcases groaned with them. The tables were littered with them, and even the chairs held a few volumes that had strayed from their shelves. The contents of my library would have endowed any hospital in London with a handsome income for ever.

Yet I was miserable, and my latest purchase—an Editio Princeps of Virgil, printed by Sweynheym and Pannartz, lay almost unnoticed on my knees. For I had a letter in my pocket, the contents of which were large enough to occupy all my thoughts and gloomy enough to cloud all my happiness. It was only a short note which had arrived before breakfast.

I drew it from my pocket again, and read it over three times. Then I tore it up angrily, and threw the pieces into the waste-paper basket.

If you could recollect so trivial an event as your visit to me that morning, you would remember that the letter was

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from Professor Budlip, and that it announced his purchase of a copy of the Mazarin Bible at a ridiculously low price. You made some very scathing remarks to me about the use I was making of my life, and ridiculed my intense devotion to my books. I think that the course of events which has led me to my present goal was first set in motion by those few words of yours.

When you left the room they were still ringing in my ears. I walked over to the window and looked out into my garden, which was glowing with thousands of roses, white, yellow, pink and crimson, in every conceivable shade and variety, but even the flowers could not distract my thoughts from your words. I was the more annoyed with what you had said because it merely emphasised the vague whisperings of my own consciousness. I had always managed to stifle these whispers, but your voice is too loud and precise for a man to turn a deaf ear to anything you may say. And I told myself that perhaps you were right after all, and that there were better things in the world than books, and objects more worthy of a man's strength and intellect. Yet the words were no comfort to my mind. Even if they were true, it was still most irritating that Budlip should have got the Mazarin Bible for less than its value.

My meditations were interrupted by the entrance of a footman bearing some letters. I took them from him without any show of interest. The 2.30 post was merely local, and was chiefly composed of circulars. I tore three or four of these across without opening them, put aside two book catalogues, and opened the only letter, a square envelope of very thick paper, addressed in a large, angular handwriting.

But as I read the contents I gave a sudden exclamation of surprise, and my hands trembled with excitement. I read the letter again and again, pacing up and down the room with rapid strides. A poor man who had just come

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into a great inheritance could scarcely have felt or shown a greater joy. In one moment I had been lifted from the depths of despair to the seventh heaven of delight. The letter ran as follows :

“SILENT SQUARE, W.

“DEAR SIR,—I saw in last night’s paper that Professor Budlip had secured a copy of the Mazarin Bible, printed by Gutenberg and Fust, making the eighth copy known to exist in the world. The paper went on to state the whereabouts of the known copies, and offered an opinion that no more would be discovered, as for over two hundred years the value of the book had been almost universally known, and collectors had searched the world for it. In this the writer of the article is mistaken. I have a copy in my possession, and am open to an offer for the same. I can, moreover, sell it to you at an entirely inadequate price, if you will do me a favour which will cost you nothing but a little personal exertion on my behalf.

“If you will make your way to Peebles Square, Notting Hill, W., you will have no difficulty in finding my residence. For some reason or other, it is neither on the map nor in the directory. I shall be in to-morrow between three and seven.

“I am,

“Your obedient servant,

“JOHN SILVER.”

I went to a table and unfolded a large map of London. After a considerable search and many references to the index, I found Peebles Square. It was in the centre of a dense mass of small and crooked streets, and appeared to have only one entrance. As the writer of the letter said, there was no Silent Square to be found in the neighbourhood, nor was there any such name in the index. This did not strike me as peculiar, for the best London maps are

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very defective, especially in the outlying and crowded districts.

I folded up the map and rang the bell. When the footman entered I told him to call a hansom. Then I went to a writing table, unlocked one of the drawers, and taking out a cheque book, placed it in my pocket. In a minute or two the man returned and said that the hansom was at the door.

"I shall not be in till dinner time," I said as I got into the cab, "and if Professor Budlip calls, say I am sorry to have missed him, but I have an important engagement. Tell the man to drive to Peebles Square, Notting Hill, W."

"Never 'eard of sich a place, sir," said the driver from the roof.

"Well, drive to Notting Hill and ask," I answered sharply; "it's not my business to direct you."

The man whipped up his horse. I leant back on the cushions and lit a cigar. Then I pulled out the letter and re-read it. I could scarcely believe my good fortune, but I should have found it harder to believe that this drive to Peebles Square was but the first step to the accomplishment of a journey which would take up two years of my life.

CHAPTER II

SILENT SQUARE

TWENTY-FIVE minutes' quick driving took me into the district of Notting Hill. Repeated inquiries on the part of the cabman failed to elicit the exact position of Peebles Square, and the hansom seemed to go by leaps and bounds in every direction but the right one. After each five minutes of furious driving the man stopped and occupied two minutes in extracting fresh information and heaping curses on the last man who had instructed him. The neighbourhood seemed an endless wilderness of slums. We appeared to have driven through miles and miles of squalid streets, and I began to think I should soon be getting into the country, though in reality we had been going round and round in a circle, and were barely outside the four mile radius. Then at last a man more truthful or more intellectual than his fellows gave lucid instructions how to reach the entrance to Peebles Street. He added that it was impossible to drive into Peebles Square, as Peebles Street was the only entrance, and the end of that street was reached by a narrow alley between two houses.

In less than five minutes we reached a narrow opening in a line of back walls. The passage was paved with stone and guarded by two posts, apparently to prevent anyone trying to drive over the pavement. A small crowd collected round the hansom and watched me alight. It was evident that hansoms were almost as rare as gondolas in this district of London.

I paid the cabman handsomely, and made my way

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through the posts, still followed by one or two curious children.

The street was narrow and dirty, with a row of ugly little two-storied houses on either side. A few slatternly women conversed in the doorways, and the centre of the road was occupied by children and mongrel curs basking in the narrow strip of sunshine. It was one of the backwaters of the great city, undisturbed by traffic, and only collecting its own scum year after year in silence.

I walked to the end and saw the name of the street painted on a rusty iron plate. It was called Peebles Terrace, W. The man had made a mistake, but Peebles Street could not be far off. The road terminated a few yards further on, but a narrow footpath between two houses led into a sort of square paved with stone flags. I resolved to ask my way, and looked about me for some one who would be likely to receive my question with sympathy and answer it with intelligence.

There was not a single man in sight, and the nearest approach to one was to be found in a small boy of four, who was pouring dust on his head, doubtless in penance for his past sins. The women at the doorway were forbidding in aspect, harsh in feature, and ungainly in shape. Two of them were standing quite close to me. One was very thin and the other absurdly fat. The bones of the thin one seemed to have cut through her clothes, while the flesh of the fat one had burst through all restraint, and a single button, strained to the utmost length of its thread, was all that held her blouse together. They were both laughing immoderately, and I felt that they were looking at me. I turned round and faced them boldly, prepared to risk insolence or, what would have been worse, jovial familiarity.

"Could you tell me where Silent Square is?" I asked courteously. For answer the fat woman laughed and the thin one pointed a skinny finger at the rusty iron plate.

Silent Square

"Yes, yes," I said hastily, "I noticed that; but how far am I from Silent Square?"

"Dunno. Never 'eard of it," was the curt reply.

"Is there a restaurant," I continued; "I mean a public-house, anywhere near?"

This introduced a subject on which both the women were evidently qualified to speak, and for quite two minutes I was overwhelmed with a torrent of names and directions, from which I tried to extract the central facts. The "Blue Boar" was undoubtedly the nearest, and the "Crown and Sceptre" was the cheapest, but the "Red Cow" sold the best gin. There was, however, some difference of opinion on this last point, and, as it seemed likely to be decided by an ultimate appeal to arms, I thanked them for the information and turned to go. This decisive measure called for an armistice, and they both moved after me with offers of an escort. Fortunately, however, they differed as to my proper destination, and became so personal in their arguments that they forgot my presence, and I made my escape down the narrow footpath. But choice pieces of family history still rang in my ears as I passed into the little square beyond.

There I found the "Blue Boar," and, having purchased a small glass of vile whiskey, I sipped it cautiously and asked the man behind the bar if he could direct me to Silent Square.

"Never 'eard of it," said the man. "Is it a fancy name, or what? Julia?"

In answer to the summons a lady, resplendent in faded mauve velvet and jingling with silver ornaments, appeared from an inner room and smiled graciously at the stranger within their gates.

"Ever 'eard of Silent Square, Julia?"

"No, never 'eard of such a place. I s'pose you wouldn't call this Silent Square about closing time, would you?"

She laughed.

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"I want to go there," I continued. "A man named Silver lives there, I believe."

Both the man and the woman burst into roars of laughter.

"Oh, 'im!" cried the lady; "why, that's close by. You can't miss it. It's down the end of the passage leading out of this square. Of course, what a thick 'ead I am not to have thought of it! Silent Square! Lor, it's a good name for it! It is silent, ain't it, Enery?" and they both laughed again. I began to feel uncomfortable.

"Do you know Mr. Silver?" I asked.

"Never seen 'im. No one 'as ever seen 'im. They say 'e's mad. I don't know if there is such a person. But there's 'is daughter, or she calls 'erself 'is daughter. She's a beauty, she is, and no mistake. There ain't a face in the picture papers to touch 'ers, I'll warrant. All golden 'air and such like—like some advertisement."

"He sells books, I believe," I said coldly. I was not interested in the daughter.

"'E says so outside 'is 'ouse, but I never 'ear of anyone buying any. And to tell you the 'onest truth, sir," she said, lowering her voice, "I wouldn't go in that 'ouse if you paid me. Not a soul about 'ere will go in the square after dark. There's somethin' wrong about 'im. 'E's a Nihilist or Fenian or murderer, or else I don't believe 'e exists, and that's worse. My 'eart goes out to that poor child, though she's as 'aughty as a countess in the *Family 'Erald* stories."

"Does no one else live in the square?" I asked.

"Not a soul," said the man; "'e bought it all three years ago, and won't 'ave a brick touched or a room occupied. It 'ad a name once, I b'lieve, but 'e pulled it down, and I'm 'anged if I can rec'llect it. Some say 'e's 'alf a man and 'alf a monkey and crawls about on all fours."

"Thank you for your information," I said, depositing threepence on the counter. "Good afternoon."

Silent Square

I found the opening in one corner of the square. It was not more than three feet in width, and lay between high dead walls of crumbling brick. Two dirty children followed me curiously to the entrance, and then stopped and whispered to each other. The passage ran for some distance and had two right-angled turns in it. It finally opened out into another square, the sides of which were not more than twenty yards each way. Some of the houses were four stories in height, and had evidently once been inhabited by prosperous people. I could see at a glance that one house, which occupied a whole side of the square, must have stood there many years before the ever rising sea of brick and mortar had crept up to its walls. It was lower than the others and built of brick mellowed with age and crusted here and there with lichen. A wrought-iron gateway stood in front of the steps, but the gate had disappeared. The walls had cracked in one or two places, and all the windows were boarded up. The whole place looked as though no one had lived in it for years.

And, indeed, the square itself might have been part of a deserted city. All the other houses appeared to be in a worse state of ruin and two of them were roofless and blackened with fire. There was not a soul to be seen in the whole place. A few blades of grass appeared between the stone flags in the centre of the courtyard, and the square was so small that most of it was in shadow. There was almost complete silence, but I could hear a barrel organ in some other street playing a music hall air and an occasional squeal of laughter in the distance.

I smiled. The place was so unlike a London square. A sensible landlord would have patched up these ruins and converted them into rookeries teeming with life. I thought the owner must indeed be mad, or else so rich that he cared nothing for a few pounds a week. It was interesting.

I crossed the square to the house with the iron gate-

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way, and, when I reached it, I saw a small, black tin plate nailed on to the door. A close inspection revealed the following inscription:

“JOHN SILVER. Dealer in Books.”

The name of the man stood out clean and white, and appeared to have been painted over some other name. The record of his occupation was faint and scarcely decipherable. He had evidently taken over some other person's business.

My heart beat fast with expectation, but, as my eye wandered over the desolate front of the building, I felt some misgivings. It was a strange place for a bookseller to choose. There was only one entrance to the square, and no one would be likely to enter it except by mistake. There were no passers-by, and the neighbourhood was the last that would commend itself to a book-hunter.

But it was possible that the man advertised and was independent of chance customers. I tried to recall the name. I could not remember having heard of it until a few hours previously, and I knew the name of every dealer of importance in the whole of Europe. Yet the man who had a Mazarin Bible to offer could hardly be a common street hawker of twopenny selections.

I ascended the broken steps and looked for the bell. I only found the place where it should have been, and I saw that the knocker had also been wrenched off. Then for a moment I was disheartened and half inclined to turn back. I recalled the idle gossip of the people in the “Blue Boar,” and coupled it with the somewhat enigmatical condition in the man's letter. I remembered the book was to be bought for a price—not money, but a service to be rendered—and for a few seconds I hesitated.

Then I laughed at my own timidity, and resolved to see the matter through. I raised my stick and knocked. I

Silent Square

waited a minute, but there was no reply. Then I knocked again, and heard the sound reverberate through the house, but still no one answered. I determined to take the question of entrance into my own hands, and, turning the handle of the door, pushed it open.

It opened into a sort of dim twilight. The hall windows were boarded up, but some window high up on the stairs let a few rays of light filter down into the gloom. I certainly did not feel very cheerful as I tried to distinguish things in the semi-darkness. The whole atmosphere was depressing. The ruined houses and deserted square, the absence of light and sound, the damp, cold air that suggested a cellar, all combined to produce a chilling effect on my spirits. I hesitated again, and had half a mind to turn back. Then the broad band of light that had streamed in from the square outside suddenly narrowed and disappeared, and the door swung to with a crash. At the same time I heard the faint notes of a violin in the distance.

I groped my way back to the door and, fumbling for the handle, flung it open again and listened. The sound of the violin came from upstairs, and the instrument was played by no mean performer. I made up my mind to proceed on my quest, and, striking a match, found the balustrade of the stairs. Before I ascended, however, I struck another, and examined the hall and staircase. The whole place was absolutely devoid of carpet or furniture, and the only thing that attracted my attention was a horizontal iron bar fixed on the ceiling. It ran from the door to the foot of the stairs, and then ascended at the same angle as the staircase, finally disappearing round a corner. The use of it was not apparent, and it was certainly not ornamental; but I gave it no further thought and commenced the ascent with one hand on the balustrade.

The stairs creaked horribly, and I stumbled more than once in the darkness. The violin still played on. Whoever

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occupied the house must have been very deaf or else have been completely wrapped up in his music. Then, as I reached the half-landing, the music stopped, and a few seconds afterwards I heard the sound of an opening door.

"Is anyone in?" I called out. There was no reply, but in a few seconds I heard a curious thumping sound, coming closer and closer towards me. I stopped and listened. Then, in the semi-darkness, I saw a black mass moving swiftly towards me along the ceiling, and a second later something bumped against my head. I quickly put up my hand to ward it off and grasped a man's body. Then I stepped on one side with a cry of horror, for my hand had passed beneath it and encountered no legs. It was merely a body suspended from the ceiling.

CHAPTER III

JOHN SILVER, DEALER IN BOOKS

I SPRANG down one or two stairs, and, fumbling for my matchbox, struck a light. A strange sight met my eyes.

There, hanging from the iron bar on the ceiling, was a man, or rather the half of a man. He had no legs and he clung to the bar with both his muscular hands, apparently as much at ease as though he was standing on the stairs below. By the flickering light of the match he looked like some great spider. I stared at him in silence; then the match burned down to my fingers, and we were again in darkness.

I lit another, and this time saw that the strange apparition was smiling at me.

"Who are you?" I cried.

"The owner of the house," was the quiet reply. The voice was soft and musical, with some trace of a foreign accent.

"Didn't you hear me come in?" I asked.

"I have just heard you come in," he replied; then he laughed.

"I am Dr. Silex," I said curtly. "Are you John Silver?"

"I am," he answered. "Come upstairs." Then the thumping noise recommenced, as he began to move hand over hand along the iron bar.

I followed till we reached the landing. The light was better here, and I saw that the iron bar went straight into the wall over the top of one of the doors. The man moved

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quickly towards the entrance, and, holding on by one hand, pushed the door open with the other. Then he dexterously swung himself under the lintel, and, grasping another bar within the room, moved a few feet forward till he reached an upright stanchion. He slid down this and dropped himself into a chair. I followed him through the door and saw what at first appeared in the dim light to be a lumber room.

It was a large apartment, and was crammed full with an odd mixture of treasures and rubbish. The walls were covered with shelves piled up with books and china and bundles of clothes. The floor was thickly strewn with heaps of old firearms, Hindoo gods, tin kettles, cracked earthenware, moth-eaten skins, hats, sham jewelry, and every conceivable article under the sun. Even the space on the ceiling was not wasted. It was covered with iron hooks, and from these hung dark bundles of various shapes and sizes. A narrow footpath, a few inches wide, was left for any visitor who might come to inspect them. The owner himself was independent of all such conveniences. The room was traversed in every direction by bars similar to that by which he had entered, but nearer to the ground, so that he could wriggle his way to almost any part of his establishment. The whole place was thick with dust, and every corner of it was crossed and re-crossed by hundreds of cobwebs. Some of the articles must have lain undisturbed for years and years, and it was evident that John Silver's trade was not a very brisk one.

I threaded my way carefully along the narrow path and searched the whole room with eager eyes. The man watched me with a faint smile on his weather-beaten face, and, taking up his violin, which lay on the floor beside his chair, fingered it lovingly, and drew the bow across its strings.

"I got your letter," I said, as I reached the further wall and tried to decipher the titles of a heap of dusty volumes ;

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"have you any other good books beside the one you mentioned?"

"For its size," he answered, "this is the best collection of books in the world."

I looked at him with an incredulous smile. The man was either jesting, or else he was what he was supposed to be—a lunatic.

"Can I look at them?" I asked.

"You can, Dr. Silex," he replied. "That is why I have asked you here," and, putting up his violin to his shoulder, he began to play a soft, low melody on the instrument. And, as he played, I forgot for a while to look at the books. The air was strangely fascinating. It was not beautiful, as we count beauty in music, but full of chords and intervals that are strange to our Western ideas of harmony. No instrument but the violin could have produced them. At first the music seemed harsh and unmelodious, like some familiar air played out of tune; but, before I had listened to a dozen bars, I grasped the motif, and it seemed to me that no music I had ever heard before expressed such depth of sorrow. The cripple's eyes were fixed on me, and they seemed to shine with a peculiar light.

At last the music died away in a few weird arpeggio chords, and I felt as though some weight had suddenly been lifted off my mind.

"What tune was that?" I asked, turning again to the bookshelf.

"Perhaps," he replied, "it was my thoughts materialised into sound—but you have not come to listen to music. You are at liberty to examine my books."

I turned to the shelf nearest me and took three books from it at random. They were quartos, black with dust, and had been thrown so carelessly on the shelf that I was obliged to dig them out from under a heap of plated fish knives and odd bits of broken metal. I banged them together till the air was filled with a cloud of dust. Then

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I opened one, and glancing at one or two lines, turned quickly to the title page. I was flabbergasted. The book was the "First Quarto of Romeo and Juliet."

"Man alive!" I cried out, striding towards the cripple and catching him by the arm; "do you know what you have got here?"

"One of Shakespeare's 'First Quartos,' is it not?" replied Silver, with exasperating calmness. "I thought I put them on that shelf. Which one is it?"

"Which?" I said sarcastically. "Which? Why, 'Romeo and Juliet,' of course." Is the man mad? He talks as if the place was strewn with "First Quartos;" as if it were one of the volumes of the "Hundred Best Books," sold with the bookcase complete and half-bound in imitation morocco.

"Look at the other volumes," was the quiet answer. I looked, and, uttering fresh exclamations, sank down on a heap of old uniforms and feverishly turned over the pages. The other two were the "First Quartos of Hamlet and Macbeth," in perfect condition. The three together would have been cheap at £1,500.

There was a minute's silence. Then I raised my head and stared at the crippled object in the chair.

"Who are you?" I cried, hoarsely. "A millionaire masquerading as a book dealer? What are you? How did you get these books? Have you robbed the libraries of Europe?"

"I should reserve your exclamations," said John Silver, with a faint smile, "or your vocabulary will hardly be extensive enough by the time you have finished. If you are interested in Shakespeare, you will find a few more quartos in that old copper coal-scuttle, but I am afraid you will blacken your fingers. We use it for its proper purpose in the winter."

I rose to my feet, and, sweeping all the rubbish off the shelf with a crash, reverently replaced the three volumes I

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held in my hand. Then I went down on my knees beside the coal-scuttle and drew forth its treasures one by one, dusting them carefully with my handkerchief and turning over their leaves with trembling fingers. I was speechless with amazement. John Silver still watched me with his keen dark eyes.

Then I rose and positively ransacked the room, turning out books from shelves and corners, unearthing them from piles of rubbish, drawing them out of strange nooks and hiding places, and, as I dusted each one, I laid it on some shelf, hurling aside everything else and breaking glass and china till the ground was strewn with fragments. Yet never a word of reproach escaped the owner's lips. But he occasionally gave vent to a low chuckle, as some specially heavy article, like a kettle or a bundle of fire-irons, went flying to the floor.

And what wonders were displayed before my eager eyes. It seemed to me as though all the treasures of the earth were heaped up and spread out before me. Surely Aladdin in the "Enchanted Cave" had never feasted his sight on such gems as these. Here were scattered, like educational works on a penny book-stall, the finest productions of the ancient presses of Europe. Volumes printed by Caxton, Wynken de Worde, and Richard Pynson; magnificent specimens of the work of Aldus Manutius, with an inch more margin each way than the finest copies I had ever heard of. Early Bibles, rare black letter pamphlets, books that I had not known even to exist, though I flattered myself few men in England had a more complete knowledge on the subject. And, to crown all, a complete and glorious copy of that king of books—the Mazarin Bible, the first book printed with movable type, and even to-day the most splendid production of all the ages of printing. The value of this book would have purchased a small estate, and it was to be mine—for a price.

There was not a piece of rubbish in the whole collection.

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An hour passed, two hours, three hours, and still I extracted and dusted and examined. My face and hands were black. My clothes were festooned with cobwebs and torn in one or two places. The room was darkening, though the sun still cast a ruddy shaft of light across it and lit up the swarthy features of the cripple, who sat now with closed eyes, his fingers clasped round the neck of his violin.

Then at last I began to feel faint and tired, and the lines of black letters swam before my eyes. I leant wearily against one of the iron bars and mechanically dusted my coat.

"Well?" said John Silver, opening his eyes. "Are you satisfied?"

"Yes," I replied feebly; "it is wonderful. I cannot speak of them. I have many of them myself, but not such copies as these. How much do you want?"

"For the Mazarin Bible?"

"For the lot," I replied. "For the lot! Everyone of them, down to the pamphlets which you have used to wrap up nails in. How much do you want?"

"There are about five hundred volumes," he answered, "and they would be cheap at £100,000."

I drew out my cheque-book and began to take the cover off my stylographic pen. Then I stopped, and, for some reason or other, Cordeaux's four words began to ring in my ears. I commenced to idly wonder how much good £100,000 might do if spent in a more worthy manner, in the endowment of a hospital, the foundation of a school, the furtherance of some charitable scheme which might lighten the misery of the poor. John Silver noticed my hesitation and smiled. He did not know the cause.

"For the present, Dr. Silex," he said, "let us discuss the matter I wrote to you about. In any case, the Mazarin Bible would not be included in the sale of this library, whatever price was offered. I am prepared to practically

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give it you, if you will assist me in another matter I have in hand. I will sell it you for fifty pounds, so that you can tell your friends you have acquired a wonderful bargain."

I gave a low whistle. Sir John Thorold's copy, the last that came into the market, sold for £3,900. This copy was, indeed, a bargain at the sum mentioned, but the rest of the purchase price had yet to be considered, and perhaps the whole matter was a fraud. My business instinct asserted itself at once. I took the famous Bible from its shelf and turned over the leaves, no longer a wild enthusiast, but an expert, with eyes keen as those of a hawk to detect some flaw or some missing leaf. The Bible, as book collectors know, is not paged, and the task promised to be a tedious one.

"I will guarantee it to be perfect," he said, impatiently drumming on the arms of his chair.

I continued to mechanically turn over the beautiful leaves, caressing each one with the tips of my fingers, as a lover might caress the cheek of his sweetheart.

Then I said suddenly, "What do you want me to do?"

"Sit down and I will tell you," he answered. I sat myself down on a pile of old carpets and continued to examine the book.

"In the first place," he said, "I will tell you that I am a very rich man, so do not imagine that I am a needy adventurer trying to curry favour with a millionaire."

I laughed. "These books alone are a fortune," I replied.

"And only a small part of my fortune," he answered, "or rather of the fortune I hold in trust for another." He drew a small key from his pocket and held it out to me.

"If you will remove that pile of armour in the corner," he continued, "you will find a cupboard. Please open it with this key and bring me out a small green box which you will see on the top shelf."

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I moved the armour and found the door of the cupboard. It appeared to be made of oak, and matched the panels of the walls, but directly I turned the key in the lock and swung the door back I saw that the oak was merely a facing, and that the cupboard was lined with four inches of solid steel. I struck a match and found the box. It was about nine inches square and six inches in height, and made of some natural green wood richly carved with figures and arabesques. I brought it across to him and reseated myself on the carpets.

He took another small key from his pocket, and, unlocking the box, threw the lid back. The shaft of sunlight through the window streamed full on its contents, and my eyes were for a moment dazzled by a thousand points and rays of light, white, blue, green, purple, yellow and orange, quivering and scintillating as the box moved slowly in its owner's hands.

"Diamonds," he said. "Would you care to look at them?" and he handed me the box.

I took it and gazed on its contents with wondering eyes. Then I stirred the jewels with my fingers, and, taking one or two handfuls out of the box, let them stream down again in a shower of rainbow light. The gems were of various shapes and sizes. Two were as big as small filberts and some no larger than a small pea. Some were cut rose fashion, some tablet, and all were of wonderful whiteness and brilliancy.

"What would they be worth?" he asked.

"I could not tell you," I answered, still playing with the cascade of coloured fire. "I know nothing about jewels, but the total value must be enormous. Why have you shown them to me? I am not likely to purchase any of them."

"I have shown them to you," he answered, "because they have some connection with our bargain. I want you to take them to a diamond merchant and obtain an offer

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for the lot. I also wish to sell all my books. Will you obtain an offer for these as well?"

"I will buy the books myself," I said.

"That is as you please," he replied. "Personally, I would rather that you did not, for there are better channels for your wealth than collecting old books. Money is power, but when it is locked up in curios and objects of art it is so much dross. I wish to realise a large sum of money for a certain object, and I want your assistance."

"I will sell them for you," I answered. "It will not be much trouble to me, and, in fact, it will be some occupation and amusement; but why do you depute such a matter to another?" and I looked at him suspiciously.

"I am, as you see, a cripple," he replied, "and have not moved from this house since I first entered it, five years ago. I am also an unknown man, believed to be poor, and by some even a lunatic. It would be hard for me to dispose of these jewels. I should be subjected to annoying questions and inquiries. I should be beaten down in price. I might even be accused of theft. I will gladly pay to be freed of such annoyances. No one will doubt Dr. Silx, the millionaire."

I gave a keen glance at his face, and my look was returned frankly and openly. I experienced a strange feeling of shame at my suspicions, which, after all, were only natural, and I half opened my lips to make an apology.

"I will sell them for you, Mr. Silver," I replied quietly. "Do you want me to do anything further?"

"Yes, when you have sold them, I want you to place the money to your own account. There will be no need to invest it, for it is all going to be spent within the next few months."

"I will do so," I replied.

"Then I want you to make all payments and arrangements in the matter I have in hand, in your own name, and take all the credit of it for yourself. I will discuss the

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matter with you another day, and will not bind you to anything now. It is sufficient to say that it is a worthy enterprise in the cause of science, and that probably you will be as enthusiastic as myself before the preparations are complete."

"I will give my assent," I replied, "when I know the project."

"Then I want you to call on a man, Captain Thorlassen by name. His address is 266, Budd Street, West Ham. Tell him that you can offer him a post as leader of an expedition which will bring him both fame and considerable pecuniary gain. Make an appointment for him to meet us here, and I will lay my scheme before both of you."

"I have no objection to calling on the man," I said. "Is that all?"

"No, there is one thing more, a slight thing, and yet of great importance to me. Before you leave here I wish to introduce you to my ward, to whom all this treasure belongs. I want you to promise me that you will treat her as though she were in reality a queen, and that you will humour her in whatever she pleases to ask."

"I will do so," I replied, with a rather doubtful voice. I began to wonder whether it would not be better to pay the full price for the book and escape an interview with a girl who, as it seemed, was not quite right in her head. But, as I fingered the volume, I remembered it was not for sale, and that I could only obtain it on these conditions, and at the same time I again felt a vague desire, of which I did not understand the full purport, to assist John Silver in this matter.

"I will do so," I repeated with more decision; "that is to say, if I am not asked to commit any offence against the law, or do anything impossible, or unworthy of a gentleman, or to impair my private fortune in any way."

"You will be asked to do none of these things," he said;

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"at the worst you will merely appear to yourself ridiculous."

"I don't mind that," I answered. "I will do as you ask."

"The book is yours, Dr. Silex," he said; "perhaps you may think that I have asked too much for it, but, if you offered me fifty thousand pounds, I would not take it, except on these conditions."

I laughed and held out my hand. "It is a bargain," I said, and the man's enormous fingers closed on my own, "yet I do not know why you have selected me for the business."

John Silver loosed my hand and looked me steadily in the face. "You are the man I want," he replied, "and I think it will be for your good. There is something else in the world beside books."

I was a little irritated at the remark. Why was everyone harping on the same subject and trying to make me believe that I was wasting my life? Even this stranger, though probably for his own ends, seemed to be concerned about my method of living.

He saw my look of annoyance, and, taking up his violin, began to play, and, as he played, I began to understand that there were emotions and passions and thoughts untouched by the world of literature. The rugged face was transformed with a strange light as he poured out his melody into the darkening room. A broad ray of crimson fell athwart the door, touching the bowed head of the player and casting a black shadow of his profile on the reddened oak.

Then, above the music, rose the sound of a clear voice singing in the distance. Nearer and nearer it came. Then it ceased, and there was a creak of some loose boards in the passage outside. The player half turned his head, and suddenly the gentle melody swelled into a glorious march of triumph, crescendo and crescendo, till the whole room

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seemed to vibrate. And, as I listened to him, I was filled with a quick and strange yearning to break loose from my present life and cast all my talents and energies into some fierce battle of arm and intellect.

"She is coming," he said in a low voice; "kneel when she enters. I implore you to kneel when she enters. It will not be for long. You have promised."

"Who is coming?" I asked.

"The Princess," cried the cripple, drawing his bow across the strings until it seemed to me that the whole room was filled with the blare of trumpets. "My Princess, and perhaps one day—yours."

The handle of the door turned, and the door itself swung back with a crash, and the broad red bar of sunlight fell on a glory of cloth of gold and jewelled crown and golden hair.

CHAPTER IV

THE PRINCESS

I LOOKED for a moment in wonder ; then I fell upon my knees and bowed my head. John Silver continued his triumphal march and did not look up from his violin.

For a few seconds the girl stood in the doorway, the red sun illuminating her from the golden crown upon her head to the golden sandals on her feet. I raised my eyes furtively and examined her. She could not have been more than eighteen, and was tall and beautiful as some white lily. Her eyes were of a deep blue, and her hair like some glorious golden cloud at sunset. Her bearing was queenly and dignified ; but her lips were slightly parted and her eyes wandered from object to object with swift, uncertain glances. I thought that I could read in their light the history of her throne, and could guess the awful source from which she had inherited her kingdom.

The marvellous splendour of her beauty, suddenly disclosed in the setting sun, filled my whole mind with reverence ; but, as I looked steadily into the dark blue depths of her eyes, a great wave of pity swept over me, and once more I bowed my head.

She moved from the doorway down the narrow path, her silk and gold encrusted robes rustling at every step. When she came to John Silver she laid a white hand glittering with gems upon his shoulder, and the music began to slow and die away until it passed into absolute silence.

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"Who is this?" she said in a low voice. "Let him rise. I can scarce ask a stranger to do me homage in a place like this."

I rose to my feet and gazed on her with heartfelt admiration. She was like some being of another world, some illuminated saint from an ancient missal. No ordinary beauty could have moved me like this.

"Who is it?" she repeated.

"It is one," said John Silver, "who has hitherto devoted his life to books, but who has now promised to do much in your service. He is rich and powerful. His name is Edward Sillex."

"A man who is in the service of books," she replied, with a sad smile, "needs no worthier master. And yet I am in need of another willing servant, for I have but one in all the world," and she held out her hand to me.

I advanced and put forward my own hand. Then I suddenly changed my mind, and, dropping on one knee, raised her fingers to my lips. And, as I did so, a curious and wild idea seized me that this was no mock courtesy. A thrill of emotion went through all my frame as I kissed the cold jewels on her fingers. Before my lips had touched them, I had been merely acting a ridiculous farce, in accordance with my promise. I had been humouring a poor deluded girl with a foolish pantomime. But now, as I knelt at her feet, it seemed a natural and becoming action, and I could almost believe that I was in the presence of Royalty itself. I rose to my feet and tried to rearrange my thoughts.

"Dr. Sillex," said the cripple, "has consented to sell your Highness's property, and lodge the money in his own account at the bank. He will also make such payments as are necessary, and call on Captain Thorlassen."

"It is kind of Dr. Sillex to undertake so much on our behalf," she said simply. "Does he understand the project we have in hand?"

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"Not yet, your Highness. The matter is to be discussed with Captain Thorlassen, and he will be present at the interview."

"Then it is still more kind of him to interest himself in that which is unknown to him, and for the benefit of strangers."

I began to feel uncomfortable. I knew that my conduct had been far from disinterested, and that I had been bribed with a price. I saw, too, at a glance that the girl was ignorant of the means that had been employed to bring me to the house and of the payment I was going to receive for what I had promised to do.

"It is hardly to be expected, your Highness," said Silver, "that Dr. Silex would undertake this work for us, if he did not hope to benefit in some way. He is a total stranger, though he is the one man in London whose help will be most useful to us. He came here at my request to purchase a Bible. I have given it him for nothing. In return he will do what I have asked him."

A shade of disappointment crossed the girl's face, and I experienced the lowest depths of shame. I would have given much to contradict Silver and say that my services had not been bought.

"A Bible?" she said, slowly; "that is not much."

"It is the most valuable book in the world," I said bitterly.

"Yet nothing to one of the richest men in London," she answered, apparently still hoping that I had some other inducement to offer my services.

"I refused to sell it," Silver exclaimed. "It was not to be bought for money. I named the price, and Dr. Silex has promised to pay it."

The girl's face flushed, and I could have strangled Silver on the spot.

"It is well," she said, coldly; "whatever the value of the book, it cannot be set against the services Dr. Silex

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will render us," and she turned as though to leave the room.

I sprang forward. I was trembling with indignation and my cheek was hot with shame.

"The book is here," I said, holding it out in my hand. "I refuse to take it. When I made the bargain I had not met your Highness. Now I have done so I will tell you that it takes more than four thousand pounds' worth of printing to buy the services of a millionaire."

"Do I understand, sir," she said, "that you wish to be released from your promise?"

"I do."

She looked inquiringly at John Silver, and he frowned. It was a situation he had not anticipated. He had evidently relied on my inordinate love of books, and on my desire for this particular volume. He did not know that his own words and actions had begun to break through the habits and motives of twenty years. He was silent.

"You shall be released," she said; "unless, indeed, we can tempt you with a larger offer."

"I will do what you wish," I replied, handing the book to John Silver; "but only on one condition."

"Name your condition," she said, "and if it is possible we will grant it. Your services are valuable to us."

"It is simply this," I answered, "that I may give my services for nothing. They are very trivial, and not worth paying for. The work will, moreover, cause me considerable amusement."

The girl gazed at me with wondering eyes, and I looked down on the ground. Then she advanced a step towards me, and her face was alight with a smile of triumph.

"Now, indeed," she said, "I have one more willing servant. For another, we need look no further than this," and she laid one of her hands on the cripple's shoulder. "John Silver has lost two of his limbs in my cause, and

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he fought by the dark lake of Nitril till its waters were red with his blood, and its shores were heaped up with dead. For the third, you look in vain. And such is all the kingdom of Thora de Brie."

I was silent, and once more a wave of pity swept over my mind. For this poor girl was raving of subjects and kingdoms in a ruined square in one of the worst quarters of London. She was young and so beautiful that the whole world might have worshipped her. Yet there was so great a shadow on her mind that she could not see the realities of life or escape from the clouds of her imagination.

"We, too, can give," broke in John Silver; "the Mazarin Bible is yours."

I smiled contemptuously. "Such gifts," I replied, "are too like a purchase. I will buy the book with money and not with my services. Lady, I will bid you farewell."

"Stay," she said hastily, "at least you cannot refuse some badge of your services. Wear this, and so long as you wear it, do your best for the cause of Thora de Brie." She drew one of the sparkling rings from her fingers and held it towards me. I watched it for a second glittering in the light of the setting sun.

"It is too valuable," I said, advancing towards her. "Have you nothing simpler? Remember, I take no payment for my services."

She replaced the ring, and drew another from her left hand, a wide circlet of rough gold engraved with a single word, "Fidelitas," in rude, ill-carven letters. The cripple began to play very softly on his violin, and, as I looked past the Princess, I caught sight of his two dark eyes glowing above the instrument; and, as I gazed into their depths, I thrilled as though I were one of the violin strings vibrating to the man's touch. And then once more there came that strange feeling of something new in my life,

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and the strong desire to accomplish some unknown object. I sank on one knee, and the Princess took my hand in hers.

"Edward Silex," she said softly, "will you be my loyal and true servant—of your own free will?"

"All that I may do in honour and self-respect I will do for you," I replied.

She stooped down and placed the ring on my little finger, and as she did so a single strand of her glorious hair fell forward and brushed my cheek. The hot blood rushed into my face, and my heart glowed with all the fires of chivalry.

"I will serve you till death," I murmured, scarcely knowing what I was saying, so intoxicated was I with her loveliness and the touch of that stray wisp of hair. Then I rose abruptly from my feet, and looked round the room with a bewildered stare. The sight of the dusty books, the piles of ironware and crockery, reassured me. The cripple was still playing the violin, but his music had grown louder and more martial. His two eyes were fixed on my face. It was a weird scene, but still part of London, where, doubtless, there was hidden away many such lumber rooms. I was glad to feast my eyes on it just then. A few seconds before I rose to my feet I was distinctly under the impression that I was in a hall of a great castle, and that knights and men-at-arms glittered round me in a solid wall of steel. I blinked my eyes, and then I saw the Princess smiling at me. In the half light she appeared to tower up from the heaps of rubbish at her feet like a beautiful column of gold.

"Farewell," I said, and, bowing low over her hand, I kissed it rather more warmly than the etiquette of a court would require. "Shall I take your Highness's jewels with me now?"

"I leave everything to you and John Silver," she replied, and with those words she turned and left the room. When

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the rustling of her golden robes had died away, the whole place seemed darker than before. I turned to John Silver.

"I will take the jewels," I said abruptly, "though this seems a rough sort of neighbourhood. When I have disposed of them, I will call on the man you mentioned. Somehow, his name seems familiar to me. Have you nothing further to tell me?" and I searched the man's face with a keen glance.

"Nothing," he replied, handing me the box and its key.

"I have the right to know a good deal more," I said sternly.

"You have the right," he answered.

"I have undertaken to serve a lady who is a complete stranger to me in a business the mere nature of which has not even been revealed. The lady, if I may say so without disrespect, appears to be under some delusion."

"She would appear to be so."

"If I ask for no more information," I continued, "and consent to do these things in the dark, it is for pity of her, and because I know she needs a friend."

"It does you credit," he said with a smile, "but you shall know a great deal more when you bring Captain Thorlassen to me, and later on you may perhaps know everything. I do not think I have been unreasonable. You have not committed yourself to much."

I glanced at the ring on my finger, and wondered whether, after all, I had not committed myself to a good deal. Then I suddenly remembered the object of my visit and drew out my cheque-book.

"I will take the Bible," I said, "and I will pay you five thousand pounds for it."

"Very well," he answered. "It is a handsome offer—and the other books?"

"I will send for them, and place the money in my bank for your purposes."

"Do not trouble to write a cheque," he said. "Pay the

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five thousand pounds in as well. We trust you. We only ask you to trust us. Good-bye."

He held out his hand, and, as I grasped it, I looked him straight in the eyes and tried to read something of this mystery. Then I suddenly started, and loosed my hands from his fingers. I had distinctly heard the clash of armour and the blare of trumpets. I stepped back and stared round the room. It was now so dark that I could distinguish nothing clearly but the square head and shoulders of John Silver silhouetted against the window. Then they died away, and for a moment everything assumed strange shapes and forms, as the most ordinary things will in the twilight. I thought I could see the wreckage of a battle, the heaps of slain, the broken weapons, and the torn standards. The walls and bookcases had grown into a vista of gigantic gorge and precipice, and where the grey patch of the window had been there were wreaths of mist curling and floating across the surface of a lonely lake. And still I heard the sound of the trumpet like a far echo in the distance.

I rubbed my eyes and looked again. It was nothing but a dark room full of books and furniture.

"Good night, Mr. Silver," I said heartily, anxious to be out of the place into the fresh air. "I will advise you of all I do," and, making my way out of the room and down the stairs, I passed out into the square.

It was a beautiful evening, and I stood on the steps for a moment while I drank in the cool evening breeze. The square was still absolutely deserted; not a light in any window and not a sound of anyone stirring in the house. A sparrow twittering in the eaves above my head was the only sign of life. But in the distance I could hear the florid notes of a barrel organ, the shouts of a drunken brawl, the bark of a dog, and all the multitude of small noises that steal up from a great city at night.

I reached home in safety and placed the diamonds in

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the safe. Then I had dinner and retired to my study to gloat over my new-found treasure—the most valuable book in the world.

But, as the blue smoke of my cigar floated up to the ceiling, I found myself thinking very little of the valuable volume and a great deal of the way I had obtained it, and more still of the Lady Thora de Brie. My triumph over Professor Budlip had faded into the background, though the king of all books lay with its pages open on my knees.

Then the clock struck eleven, and the sound roused me from my reverie. Looking down, I saw the Mazarin Bible, and I laughed. Twelve hours ago I would have given my soul to have it in my hands, so that I could flaunt it in my rival's face. Now I regarded it idly, and began to look on the five thousand pounds as a waste of money. I shut the book up with a bang, and, jumping to my feet, placed it in the safe and went up to bed. As I undressed I thought of all I had to do during the next few weeks, and the name of Captain Thorlassen began to worry me. I was certain I had heard it before. Then, just as I was ready to get into bed, an idea struck me. I put on my dressing-gown, and, going back to the library, began to search through several dusty volumes on a top shelf. For ten minutes I opened books, referred to indexes and turned over pages. I found what I wanted, and went back to bed.

But I had much to think of before I went to sleep, for I had discovered that Captain Thorlassen was the second in command in the Norwegian Polar Expedition of 1882.

CHAPTER V

AN EXTRAORDINARY EXPEDITION

FOR a whole month I was fully occupied with the affairs of John Silver and his ward. I divided the diamonds into small parcels, which I distributed among the various merchants of London and Amsterdam, and the two large stones I sold privately to a Russian prince. No questions were asked by the dealers. The Russian made a few inquiries for sentimental reasons, thinking it possible that two such splendid stones had a long and romantic history. I merely told him that they had been taken from a new mine in which I had a substantial interest. I said the position of the mine was for financial reasons still a secret. These two magnificent gems were sold for fifty thousand pounds apiece. The others fetched no less than six hundred thousand pounds, making a total of seven hundred thousand pounds.

I changed my mind about the purchase of the books, but had them sent round to my house, where I disposed of them to some of my acquaintances at prices which realised one hundred and fifteen thousand pounds. I further credited Silver's account with five thousand pounds, the price arranged for the Mazarin Bible, and thus held at the latter's disposal the sum of eight hundred and twenty thousand pounds for a purpose of which I had been told nothing, and to which my only clue as yet was the name of Captain Thorlassen.

Towards the end of July I made my way to 266, Budd Street, West Ham, and met for the first time a man who

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was afterwards destined to become my closest friend.

Captain Thorlassen was a bronzed and weather-beaten man of about fifty. By birth he was a Norwegian, but he had been associated with Englishmen for most of his life, and spoke the language perfectly. In appearance he was not tall, but of such powerful build that a man might easily be mistaken as to his height, which was in fact five feet eleven inches. His face was lined and scarred with a continual life of hardship and responsibility. He had been in the ill-fated Strömson Expedition of 1882, and had lived on the ice for over six months without any food but the raw flesh of birds and the occasional luxury of a walrus. He had been in the Antarctic Expedition of 1886, and had seen his ship crushed like a nut between two mountains of ice. He had tried the North-West Passage four times, and had been in the first Expedition with Nordenskjöld. His whole soul was wrapped up in the excitement of exploration and discovery, and his whole heart in the dangers of the sea. Yet for more than a year he had not set foot on the deck of a ship, and had been eating his heart out in the back parlour of a dingy villa.

I introduced myself, and briefly stated that I had an enterprise in hand which would bring both fame and fortune to those concerned in it. I added that I was at that moment not prepared to discuss either the object or the destination of the expedition, nor yet the terms to be offered. If, however, he would call the next day about three o'clock at Hanbury House, Great Charteris Street, I would drive him round to see the person who would lay the whole matter before him. I would, however, tell him so much, that the sum of over £800,000 was to be expended on the object in view.

Captain Thorlassen gave a low whistle, and his face brightened. "Eight hundred thousand pounds!" he repeated. "I think I could find the North Pole with that

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money," and he looked at me inquiringly. I was silent, and took my hat and gloves from the table. "Will you have a cigar, sir, and a drop of excellent brandy?" he continued.

"No, thank you," I replied, getting up from my seat, "I am pressed for time. Will you be at my house at three o'clock to-morrow?"

"I will," he said heartily, holding out his great brown hand. "And if the job is anything to take me out of this hole and set my feet on the good boards of a ship, there will be no difficulty about the terms."

The next day he called punctually at my house, and we both drove round to the entrance of Peebles Terrace, and made our way to the house in Peebles Square.

This time the door was opened to us by a neatly dressed maid, and we followed her up the staircase, where a lamp was burning to relieve the darkness. We were shown into the room opposite the one where I had had my previous interview. It was a large and handsomely furnished apartment. The walls were panelled with oak and hung with pictures of decided merit. Rare porcelain, bronze statues, Japanese ivories, antique silver and enamels, were scattered about the various tables and shelves in endless profusion. It was the ordinary living room of a rich man, and a strange contrast to the weird disorder of the other apartment. There was only one peculiar thing about it. All the windows were carefully closed and boarded up. The place was lighted by three silver lamps hanging from the ceiling.

I was a little annoyed when I entered and looked round the apartment. I began to fancy that Silver's former interview with me had been stage-managed to produce a certain effect, and that the scenery of the room and the costume of the girl had been carefully chosen to inspire me with a sense of some mysterious power.

The cripple was seated at a large pedestal writing-table, which was covered with books and newspapers. His

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deformity was concealed, and he looked like an ordinary English gentleman. As we crossed the room he held out his hand.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," he said. "I am a cripple, Captain Thorlassen, and cannot rise to greet you. Will you sit down," and he pointed to two comfortable morocco-covered chairs facing him. Then he opened a drawer, and, taking out a box of cigars, handed them to us and lit one himself.

"I find it easier to discuss matters if I smoke," he said, "though I have only recently acquired the habit. Now, Captain Thorlassen, to come to the point at once, are you willing to take command of an expedition to the North Pole?"

Captain Thorlassen's eyes flashed, and his whole face was lit up with eager pleasure.

"Am I willing, Mr. Silver?" he said quickly. "I tell you it would be like going home after a long voyage to get once more among the ice."

"Very good. You are, I know, a capable man, not only in nautical matters but, which is more important, in the command of men. Are you married?"

"No, Mr. Silver."

"Nor likely to be married?"

"No."

"Have you any depending on you?"

"Not a living soul."

"Very good. You are what I should desire every man in the expedition to be, a free man, whose life is his own property, to risk as he chooses. Now, I must first tell you that Dr. Silex, who is, as you know, a very rich man, has consented to draw all the cheques in this matter, but he has left the scheme to me. I have, I may tell you, special knowledge of those regions, and special information which will enable the expedition to reach the Pole itself."

Captain Thorlassen nodded approvingly, and I found

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myself wondering whether I ought not to correct the false impression that I was supplying the sinews of war.

"This expedition," he continued, "will differ in many respects from all others which have preceded it. In the first place, it will be of great magnitude. We propose to equip and send out no less than twenty ships, with crews of fifty men apiece."

I leant forward in my chair and stared at the speaker in amazement.

"One thousand men!" Captain Thorlassen exclaimed; "twenty ships! impossible! and quite unnecessary."

"Money makes all things possible, Captain Thorlassen; and it is obvious that with so large a number of vessels the chance of one being successful will be very much greater than if the whole expedition depended on a single ship."

"It is stupendous," murmured the captain; "stupendous."

"You see now," he continued, "why I want a man who can lead and organise. You, Captain Thorlassen, will take command of one ship in person, and general command, so far as is possible, of the whole fleet. You will select suitable captains and crews for the other vessels. We propose to offer you £10,000 for your services, and another £5,000 if you or any of your ships actually reach the Pole itself."

Captain Thorlassen rose to his feet. "I will do it," he cried with enthusiasm; "I will do it. I will reach the Pole, gentlemen, and, if I don't, you needn't pay me a farthing."

"You have not heard all yet, Captain Thorlassen," said Silver quietly. "I told you that in many respects this expedition would differ from all others. I will continue to enumerate the points of difference. Perhaps you may not accept the post after all. No funds will be provided except on the following conditions."

Captain Thorlassen resumed his seat.

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"The first condition," the cripple continued, "is that the expedition must proceed to Cape Alfred Ernest in Grant Land, where the first winter will be spent."

"I have been there before," interrupted Captain Thorlassen. "When I was a boy, with one of the expeditions in search of Franklin."

"In the second place," Silver continued, "you will on your own ship provide accommodation for a lady and her maid. This lady will be placed in your charge, and her comfort and safety must be your especial care." A shadow crossed Captain Thorlassen's face, and he puffed hard at his cigar. I looked keenly at the speaker. Was it possible that his ward was going to take so long and perilous a voyage?

"In the third place," John Silver proceeded, keeping his eyes fixed on Captain Thorlassen's face, "you will take with you an unusually large supply of firearms for such an expedition. Each man must be armed with a magazine rifle and a revolver, and 10,000 cartridges must be taken for each weapon. You will, in addition, take on each ship a Maxim with 100,000 rounds of ammunition, and a 15-pounder with 1,000 rounds of shell. The object of this equipment will be scarcely obvious to you. You must take my word for it that this provision is indispensable for your safety. I think neither you nor Dr. Silex will suspect piracy above the 80th degree of latitude. This expedition must be ready by the beginning of April next year. You will choose your own route to Cape Alfred Ernest. You will there endeavour to get the vessels into some sheltered harbour, and close the outlet to the sea with floes and bergs of ice. There is a place on that coast which is just suited for the purpose. Your ships must remain in this harbour during the months of June and July. If all or any of you fail to reach it, you must take refuge in the best place you can get, and cut yourself off from the open sea as far as is in your power. In any case, I should

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advise you to land all your stores, and to be ready to go ashore at a moment's notice. I leave all other arrangements in the hands of you and Dr. Silex. You have an absolutely free hand as to choice of men and the nature of the equipment. But these conditions must be observed, and, if you observe them, this expedition will be accompanied by none of those horrors and hardships which have made it more perilous for a man to go in search of the North Pole than to expose himself in the thick of battle." He stopped and looked at us keenly.

The captain had listened attentively, but there was a puzzled expression on his face, which had deepened to a frown when John Silver came to the question of Maxims and 15-pounders. I myself began to think that Silver was not quite right in his head.

"What are the guns for?" asked the captain sharply.

"I cannot tell you," Silver replied; "except that they are necessary."

The captain eyed him narrowly for a moment, and then, pushing back his chair, rose to his feet.

"In an expedition of this sort, Mr. Silver," he said bluntly, "a man risks his life, and is willing to give up everything, but he expects perfect confidence to be placed in him. All must be straight and above-board. There must be no sailing in the dark, no sealed orders, so to speak. You are both rich men, and I am a poor devil who has cared more for the excitement of life than the pleasures of it, but in a thing of this kind we are equal. Tell me plainly, as one man to another, what you want me to do with these guns?"

"I have given you all the instructions that are necessary," replied Silver coldly; "you are at liberty to accept or refuse the offer."

"I do not mind the women, mark you," Captain Thorslassen continued, "though they will wish themselves back in England, poor things, before we have crossed the Arc-

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tic Circle. But I have no intention of commanding a naval expedition for God knows what purpose, and finding a rope waiting for me when I get back to England."

"What harm do you think you can do with artillery in those regions?" said Silver, quietly.

"Heaven knows!" the captain exclaimed; "all I know is that we do not want Maxims to shoot seals with. I want you to tell me what we do want them for." John Silver was silent, and played with a paper-knife.

"I am a plain man," Captain Thorlassen continued, "and I want a plain answer. You must not treat me as a child, gentlemen. I shall have the lives of my men in my care; and there is no responsibility so great, and no authority so absolute, as that of a skipper in command of a Polar expedition."

"I cannot tell you," John Silver replied promptly; "perhaps it is a mere whim of mine. Perhaps I have a grave purpose. I can only tell you that the expedition must be so equipped, and that its very safety depends on these instructions being carried out."

The captain's face brightened a little. "Of course, in self-defence," he said thoughtfully, "it would be different; but the idea is absurd. No weapons will prevail against the enemies we have to meet, against icebergs, low temperature and starvation. The space occupied by these arms would be better filled by extra provisions."

"I will give you my assurance," said Silver, "that they are necessary, and that you will not be asked to countenance anything that will bring you within the grasp of the law. I can explain no further. Come, Captain Thorlassen, you are unreasonable. If the arms are there, you are not bound to use them. You and your companions cannot be compelled to do anything. I only stipulate that the arms shall be put on board. Their mere presence will not injure either you or your reputation."

Captain Thorlassen sat down in his chair and relit his

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cigar. Silver did not disturb him, preferring to let his own view of the case become thoroughly digested.

After a couple of minutes' silence, the captain smiled. "I will go," he said; "the money is too great a temptation. And I cannot stand the parlour of my house for another six months. It is like being in the hold of a ship. I am in your hands, gentlemen. I do not think you would knowingly bribe an honourable man to commit any crime or offence against the law."

"If such a thing were intended," I said sternly, "I, for one, would be no party to it."

"Captain Thorlassen will be asked to do nothing that an honourable man may not do," said Silver. "He knows the conditions, and has agreed to them. I have no more to say to you, gentlemen. The practical arrangements I leave to you, Captain Thorlassen; the financial matters to you, Dr. Silex. I have the fullest confidence in both of you. There is much to be done, and the expedition must start at the beginning of April. As you, Captain Thorlassen, are now in our service, Dr. Silex will pay £1,000 on account to your credit at a bank for your personal expenses up to the time of your departure. I wish you good afternoon, gentlemen."

We rose to our feet. He shook hands with both of us, and we left the room.

I drove my companion back to Hanbury House and insisted on his remaining to dinner. Afterwards we discussed the details of the expedition far into the night, and speculated on the strange conditions that had been made by John Silver. I confessed to Captain Thorlassen that I was in complete ignorance of the secret object of the expedition, and that the money was being supplied through me by John Silver himself. The particular object, I said, was immaterial to either of us. Neither the captain nor the crews could possibly be forced to do anything of which they did not approve. I said nothing about

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the Princess. I was sure in my own mind that she was the passenger referred to, but for some reason or other I felt disinclined to mention her name, or associate her in any way with the mysterious objects in view.

I found Captain Thorlassen's conversation of peculiar interest. He told many stories of his previous experiences and adventures, always modestly, and only to illustrate some practical point under discussion, but yet with such simplicity and vigour that my mind was strangely stirred. A new world began to open out before my eyes, a world of strenuous life and hardship, peopled by men of action. In such a world the mere bookworm and scientist was only a speck of dust swept aside by the strong feet of those who were fighting nature with all the force of their brains and bodies. I began to despise myself, and to wonder whether, after all, this rough sailor was not doing better work in the world than anything a mere scholar could accomplish.

When Captain Thorlassen left, and I was alone in the library, I allowed my thoughts to turn once more to Thora de Brie, and to wonder why her beauty had made so strange an impression on my mind. Beautiful women were common enough in London, but I had never turned my head to look a second time at anyone of them. Yet this girl's face was constantly in my mind, and I was now even annoyed and worried at the thought of her being exposed to the terrible rigour of an Arctic winter. I tried in vain to analyse my thoughts. The only conclusion I came to was that her costume, and her surroundings, had in some way appealed to me. The air of mediævalism had surrounded her, and she had appeared as no ordinary woman in London had ever appeared before, in the robes of a queen, to the weird music of a violin, and in the semi-darkness of a strange apartment with one ray of sunlight on her face, and with an atmosphere of mystery about all her words and actions.

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She had been more like the heroine of some old romance printed in black letter and bound in yellow vellum, than a creature of flesh and blood.

I looked at the ring on my finger. The gift had been melodramatic. In the case of an ordinary girl it would have been indelicate. Yet, as I turned the circlet round on my finger and read the single word "Fidelitas," I felt that it was given with no idea of sensational effect and no thought of sentiment, but rather as a queen of old might have given a ring to a faithful courtier as a mark of approval and a badge of servitude. "Fidelitas!" I laughed, and, knocking out my pipe in the fireplace, I filled it again and smoked thoughtfully.

Then I began to idly wonder why John Silver had chosen me for a confidant and assistant. The man's own explanation was palpably a mere excuse. Though he was a cripple, he could have sent for Captain Thorlassen and placed everything in his hands. He could have easily sold the jewels and books in the public market. The thought troubled me, and I had a vague idea that something more would be required of me. I was a millionaire, and the services of millionaires are usually required to supply money. I resolved to enter into the details of expense with Captain Thorlassen. Eight hundred and twenty thousand pounds was a huge sum, but the expedition was also gigantic. I began to think that John Silver would require more money, and that he was working to obtain not only my personal but also my financial assistance.

I further came to the conclusion that he had tried to work on my feelings with a carefully-arranged piece of acting, and a face of unusual loveliness. The thought sickened me, and I turned to the contemplation of my books for comfort. They at least were genuine, and had been my friends through life.

But to my surprise I found no comfort in the long lines of faded calf and vellum. On the contrary, I began to

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wonder why I had wasted so much money on them. Though I did not realise it as yet, a great change was working in my nature. The old ideas were withering and the new had not yet sprung to life. But the seeds had been planted in my heart and brain. The few chosen sentences of John Silver, the hard breezy influence of Captain Thorlassen and his stories of the North, and even your own chance words, Cordeaux, were slowly but surely drawing my mind along a definite line of thought, and whispering that a man's true life is one of action.

I was troubled in spirit, and, rising from my chair, went up to bed. And, as I slept that night, I dreamt of much action and much reward, and every deed and every guerdon was stamped with the single word "Fidelitas."

CHAPTER VI

A RE-SHUFFLING OF THE CARDS

THE next morning the organisation of this gigantic expedition was commenced in earnest, and before many days were over the whole country knew that I, Dr. Silex, an "eccentric" millionaire, was arranging and paying for the despatch of a whole fleet for the discovery of the North Pole. The journalistic imagination ran riot in details of huge expenditure, in libellous portraits, in stupendous statistics and in ridiculous interviews. So many young men arrived at Hanbury House to ascertain my favourite amusements and what I usually ate for dinner, that my housekeeper thought the whole world was going mad, and I think she suspected that the maddest of all was her master.

The fullest information was given to all inquirers. But on one point I maintained absolute secrecy. I said nothing about the shipment of the arms and ammunition. It required, indeed, the utmost skill to keep all knowledge of these warlike preparations from the eyes of the Press and Government. But I insisted that this should be done, and Captain Thorlassen, a man of infinite resources and untiring energy, placed the orders among various Continental and American firms, and shipped the goods at various ports direct on to his own vessels with so much skill and secrecy that no whisper of the truth reached the ears of the most inquisitive official. The various large and weighty packages, labelled with the cards of fictitious provision merchants, were shipped without question or remark. Even the captains and crews themselves were in ignorance of the real nature of these consignments.

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Captain Thorlassen recognised that the magnitude of the task before him imperatively demanded an extensive division of labour. He at once engaged his crews and appointed the captains to serve under him, and not a single man had a day's leisure for the next eight months.

I myself developed an extraordinary energy which was quite foreign to my usual quiet methods of transacting business. At first I was merely the man who drew the cheques, but before a month had passed I had thrown my whole soul into the task and worked day and night in furtherance of the scheme. I made Captain Thorlassen take up his residence at Hanbury House, where everything could pass under my personal scrutiny, and all day long the library resounded to the tapping of four typewriters. There was indeed no rest for anyone who had agreed to give their services in the matter, and of all the thousand men who were labouring each at his appointed task, I think no one worked harder than myself.

From the very first it was evident that the expedition would cost a quarter of a million more than the sum set aside for the purpose. Captain Thorlassen and I had gone carefully into the figures, and, after allowing a safe margin for contingencies, we resolved that we could only purchase and equip fifteen ships out of the twenty John Silver had asked for.

We communicated this to him by letter, and in reply received an urgent summons to call on him. He went through all the figures, and frowned as he read and checked them.

"Very well, gentlemen," he said, "we must have fifteen ships. In a matter of this sort there can be no economy and no cutting down of expenses. Everything must be plentiful and of the best. But it is unfortunate. We could have done with five more ships than I originally asked for, instead of having to do with five less."

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I went away with a more favourable impression of the man. I had fully expected him to hint that it was a rare opportunity for some rich man to help the cause of science, or even to ask me outright to contribute the balance of the necessary funds. But he had merely acquiesced in the inevitable. The interview puzzled me. It was no longer clear why I had been chosen for this task. And the *raison d'être* of that first meeting, with all its mummery of golden robes and music, was still more obscure.

But I threw myself into my work with redoubled energy. There was now indeed a marked and radical change in my mode of life. I had tasted for the first time the sweets of action. I had realised the pleasures of organisation and arrangement. I had felt the keen sensation of power extending over the lives of a thousand men, and through all the intricate branches of a great undertaking. I now felt that I was a man with the best of them. Both my mind and body had grown rusty in the exotic atmosphere of my books, but now I exerted them both to the utmost, and was glad to find that they grew more vigorous from day to day. My friends looked on and marvelled. They regarded me as a harmless lunatic, and even you, Cordeaux, thought the change was too violent to be the genuine indication of a firm and studied resolve.

But before three months had passed, I had made a resolution which might justly have been deemed insane by the kindest of my acquaintances, and John Silver himself, whatever his designs were with regard to my money, did not dream that in me he had introduced a new and important factor into the ultimate development of all his plans.

About the middle of October I called at Silent Square. I had written the day before to make the appointment, and had stated that my business was important. It was only my fourth visit to the house, John Silver having made it

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clear to both me and Captain Thorlassen that he did not wish to be consulted about any arrangements or expenses, and that he could grant no personal interviews whatever. I had been much irritated by this arrangement. I told myself that I was annoyed by such unbusinesslike methods, but I think in my inmost heart I realised that the true cause of my irritation was my inability to see Thora de Brie.

On this occasion I was shown once more into the lumber room, where John Silver was seated in a heavy oak chair, with a large square sheet of brown parchment spread out on a table before him. The apartment, denuded of its books, seemed in a greater chaos than ever. It was ignoble and undignified. It was no longer a dusty treasure house, but a mere untidy rubbish heap.

"Well, Dr. Silex," he said, holding out his hand, "I hope you have come with better news than you had the last time I saw you."

"Everything is progressing well," I answered. "Thorlassen is a splendid worker, and it is impossible for the men to be idle when he is in touch with them."

"I can believe in his powers," he said drily, "when I hear of Dr. Silex, the great bibliophile, superintending the delivery of tinned meats, and even unpacking the cases with his own hands."

"Physical labour is good for man," I replied; "it is rest and recreation to a student."

"I believe you will be quite sorry when the expedition leaves, and you return to your groove. But your news, Dr. Silex? You know my wishes in this matter. They are not meant to be discourteous, but I do not wish any voice in the arrangements. This is the Silex Expedition."

"So it is called in the newspapers," I said. "One of them devoted two columns the other day to my biography and various domestic details. It concluded by saying that if every millionaire would devote his wealth to the cause

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of science, the millennium would soon come, or words to that effect. I blushed when I read it. May I smoke?"

John Silver took two cigars from his pocket, and handing me one, lit the other and laughed.

"Yes," I continued, "I blushed, not with modesty, but with shame. I have nothing to do with this expedition. I do not even know its ultimate purpose."

"The discovery of the North Pole," he said quietly.

"Ostensibly, yes; but a fifteen-pounder is useless for that purpose, and fifteen ships are as good as twenty—Mr. Silver, will you not trust me in this matter? Believe me, I have your interests at heart, and the interests of the Lady Thora de Brie."

"Have you come to ask me this?" he replied sharply; "the matter was discussed with Captain Thorlassen. He is satisfied; and, after all, he is the person most concerned."

"No," I said, "I have come for quite another purpose. You have used me for your own ends, Mr. Silver, though it seems that any other man in London would have done as well. Your purpose is unknown to me. I am now going to make use of you—for my own ends."

"I do not understand you."

"Well, in the first place, I am going to supply the necessary money to purchase and equip the five extra ships that you require."

He held out his hand, and there was a faint smile of triumph on his lips. He had not laboured and restrained himself in vain.

"I have not asked you for these, Dr. Silex; I have not even hinted at such a thing. You have done it of your own free will, and it is a generous act."

I took the proffered hand and looked into his eyes.

"I have done it of my own free will, but do not thank me until you have heard all I have to say."

"There are conditions?"

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"I impose no conditions, I merely state what I am going to do."

"What else do you propose?"

"Well, in the second place," I said, "I propose to make the name of this expedition a fact and not a lie. I propose to bear the entire cost of it, and repay you the sum of £820,000."

He leant back in his chair and stared at me with wide-open eyes. "Impossible!" he said. "Impossible!"

"You have been misinformed as to my means," I answered coldly.

"Suppose I do not consent," he said bluntly.

"You have no choice," I replied. "All the world believes the expedition to be mine. Everyone but Captain Thorlassen is under the impression that I am financing the whole business. There is no deceit. If I return you the money, the expedition is mine."

He was silent, and appeared to be wrapped up in his thoughts. Then he suddenly laughed.

"Suppose I do not consent," he said. "The Princess will not go, if I advise her not to."

I flushed with anger at his insinuation. "The North Pole can be discovered without—without the Princess," I replied; "and I have never heard of a man refusing a gift of nearly a million of money."

"What is your object in doing this?" he asked.

"It is like your own objects," I answered slowly, "only known to one person—myself. But, if you press for the reason, I will tell you in the words of the *Morning Mail*, that 'no millionaire could employ his wealth in a better way than in the advancement of science.'"

He looked hard at me and smiled. I could not face his eyes, and, walking over to the fireplace, shook the ashes off my cigar.

"No man gives without an object," he said, "and it is nearly always a personal one. You are giving me a million pounds."

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"It will be of use to you," I answered. "Where guns are required, there are men; and where there are men, there is always a use for money."

He looked thoughtfully at the parchment before him, and then he broke into a hearty laugh. "I submit," he said. "You have made yourself my master. A million will purchase much, yet I doubt if it will purchase all that you desire. No words could thank you for such a gift. I offer you no thanks, save in the cause of science, to which you have devoted your wealth. You have made it clear that you offer this money on no personal grounds."

"I hope I have made that clear," I said.

"It is a magnificent gift," he replied, "and it will have its reward—the discovery of the North Pole," and he smiled sarcastically.

"There is one more thing I have come to tell you," I continued, "and it may surprise you even more than my gifts. I intend to accompany the expedition myself."

"That does not surprise me at all," he answered. "It is the logical sequence of what you have already told me. Yet for your own sake, Dr. Silex, I would ask you to reconsider your decision."

"I have decided."

He reached out his hand and rang a bell. In a minute the door opened, and the Lady Thora de Brie entered. She was dressed in the ordinary costume of an English lady, but seemed as beautiful as ever. I rose from my seat, and advancing to meet her, knelt down and kissed her hand.

"I have news for your Highness," said Silver. "Dr. Silex insists on defraying the whole of the expenses of this expedition. He will provide twenty ships and return us the sum of £820,000."

She looked at me as though trying to read my thoughts. I gazed on the ground. "He will have his reward," she said, after a pause; "it is a righteous cause, and heaven

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will bless him. My thanks are nothing, but I gladly give them with all my heart."

"He will be our master," Silver continued, "and no longer our servant."

I faced the speaker angrily.

"Your master," I exclaimed, "but the servant of the Princess—always."

John Silver smiled. "Dr. Silex will also accompany the expedition," he continued; "I have advised him not to go."

The Princess moved quickly forward and grasped the cripple by the arm. "Have you told him everything?" she cried quickly.

"I have told him nothing, your Highness."

"You must not go, Dr. Silex," she said hastily; "there is grave danger. You may never return."

"Every Arctic explorer must face the chance of death," I replied. "I do not set up to be brave, but surely I may dare to follow where a lady dares to lead."

"You may never see England again," she said. "You are rich and happy. You have much to lose."

"I am rich," I answered, "but I do not know that I am happy. And I will not pay men to do that which I am afraid to do myself. I shall go."

"This is no ordinary expedition, Dr. Silex," she said, nervously clasping and unclasping her hands.

"I have guessed that," I replied; "but at any rate, it is my expedition, and will do as I direct."

"There is grave danger," she continued. "It is probable that not a man of all this expedition will ever return."

"If I am sending them to their death," I answered, "the least I can do is to go with them."

"I tell you," she cried, "that if you go, you will not return."

"I will go," I said obstinately. Then I kissed her hand and left the room without another word.

CHAPTER VII

A DEAD MAN'S LEGACY

ON the 23rd of March twenty whalers, reconstructed and strengthened for the trying ordeal before them, lay in London docks waiting the signal to start. They were manned by a thousand men, captained by the most experienced and adventurous navigators of the Arctic seas, amply provisioned for five years, and carried everything that could possibly add to the comfort and safety of their crews. Their equipment represented the sum total of all Arctic science and experience. As it was the largest, so it was also the most perfect expedition that had ever been sent to the North Pole.

But though everything had been ready for the start for nearly a fortnight, the fleet was still waiting in London docks. For John Silver, in whose brain lay the deep and ultimate purpose of its mission, was seriously ill, and the doctors said that any attempt to move him in his present condition would mean certain death.

In vain had the invalid pleaded with them. He had told them that the air of the sea was the breath of life to him; he had told them that the expedition must start at once, and that as it could not go without him, more than a million pounds would be wasted, and more than one thousand men thrown out of employment. He had told them that if he was to die, he would rather die in the open air with the waves splashing past his cabin than be shut up in that wilderness of brick and stone of London. But it

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was all in vain. They replied that if he went, he would certainly die, and that if he remained in his bed, he would probably recover. They were not, they said, prepared to risk a man's life, even for the sum of a million pounds.

But they told me and Captain Thorlassen that unless the invalid's mind could be diverted from this worry and anxiety, they had grave doubts as to his recovery.

On the evening of March 23rd I sat alone in my library after dinner. It was a wild night. A bitter east wind whistled round the house, and even seemed to find an entrance into my warm and comfortable apartment. I drew my chair close to the fire and gazed thoughtfully into the glowing coals. The stress of seven months' unwonted toil and exertion was over. My things were packed and put on board the *Aurora*, the same ship that was to carry John Silver and the Princess, and to be commanded by Captain Thorlassen.

All my private arrangements were now complete. I had put all my affairs in order, and appointed you, Cordeaux, as my most intimate friend, to act for me in my absence, and had left minute instructions for the ordering of my household and estate. My arrangements were, in effect, the same as a man might make in his will. It was doubtful if the expedition would be back at the end of three years, and it was just possible it would never return at all.

I was going to leave London against the wishes of everyone. You, Cordeaux, told me I was a fool, and I cast your previous words back in your teeth. You once told me that I wanted a life of action; and I had decided to get all the action a man could possibly want. My mere acquaintances in the book world said I was mad. John Silver and the Princess had used every argument in their power to dissuade me, and these two, at any rate, spoke with full knowledge of what was in store for the expedition. But I had turned a deaf ear to everyone, and now

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as I sat by my fire with a cigar between my lips I was well satisfied with all I had done and all that I was intending to do. At any rate, as I said to myself, I was risking a huge fortune in the advancement of science, and was not afraid to hazard my own life by the side of the men I employed. Quiet recluse that I had been all my life, I do not think I had any fears in this matter. I even felt the glow of enthusiasm, as I thought over the danger and difficulties that lay before me. My life was my own. I was alone in the world, and I realised with a tinge of sadness that my death would leave no great blank in the heart of any man or woman.

Then my mind reverted to my books; and, turning my head, I glanced round at the well-filled shelves rising tier on tier to the ceiling, and almost, as it were, shutting me out from the strife and trouble of the world. They had been my friends and comrades for many years, and now I was going to desert them for the close companionship of my fellow men, and leave their shelter for a life I could as yet only dimly imagine. Out of the many thousands of volumes I had chosen but three for the long voyage before me. There was a good library in each vessel, and I took these more as some link with my past life. They were the Mazarin Bible, a copy of Homer's *Odyssey*, and an *Editio Princeps* of Virgil. The two latter especially appealed to me on the eve of unknown adventures and experiences.

All the others had to be left behind, and I realised, as I looked at the long lines of vellum and leather, that the parting was not so bitter as it should have been, and that ten months ago it would have been impossible to have parted from them at all. I shrugged my shoulders and once more gazed into the fire, wondering when the expedition would start. The suspense had become wearisome, and seven months' hard work and untiring energy had made me impatient of delays. Everything had led up to and been arranged for a certain date, and now the date

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itself had become indefinite. I was on the eve of a great change in my life, and the uncertainty was hard to bear.

Then I felt a sudden pang of shame that such thoughts should be uppermost in my mind, for John Silver was lying dangerously ill, and the mere question of convenience was nothing while his life was hanging in the balance, and while the Princess was burdened with so great a load of sorrow and anxiety. I would have given much to have spared her this fortnight of pain, and to have sheltered her from all the unknown danger that necessarily lay in that long journey to the frozen fastnesses of the North.

For I knew at last, Cordeaux, that I loved her with all my heart and soul, and the knowledge was bitter pain to me. Whoever she was, and whatever future lay before her, I could not get away from the grim idea that her mind was slightly unhinged, that she was suffering from some extraordinary delusion.

My meditations were interrupted by the loud ring of a bell, the opening and closing of a door, and the sound of voices in the hall. A few moments later the footman entered, and close behind him the tall slim figure of a woman. I rose quickly to my feet and flung the end of my cigar into the fireplace. At first I thought it was the Princess, but as she advanced I saw it was the maid who had opened the door to us in Silent Square. I could see that her face was very white, and that her whole body was trembling from head to foot.

"Quick, sir," she gasped, "you are wanted at once. He is dying. The doctors say there is no hope. He has asked to see you. My lady desires you to come at once. A cab is waiting outside."

I followed her out into the hall without a word. I was too dazed at the news to ask any questions. The whole fabric of the last few months seemed to be shaken to its foundations. John Silver had planned and built it up to its completion. He alone knew its ultimate purpose. In

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his brain were all its future plans; in his hand the innumerable strings of its great undertakings. And John Silver was dying.

I entered the cab with the maid, offered a sovereign to the driver if he would do the journey in less than twenty minutes, and leaned back on the cushions with my mind a whirl of thoughts and conjectures. The servant shrank into the opposite corner and was silent. I had asked nothing, and she had proffered no information. It was enough that John Silver was dying. That was the central fact, and no inquiries could have elicited anything else of consequence.

The driver earned his sovereign, and we made our way down through Peebles Terrace to Silent Square. I was shown into the oak-panelled room. In one corner of this there was a door, and I could hear voices through the panels.

I waited there alone for ten minutes. Then the Princess came out with the two doctors. Her face was white and stained with tears, and there was an expression in her eyes I could not fathom—a strange look of horror, as though she had been confronted with something new and terrible in her life. She held out her hand, and I kissed it. Neither of us spoke. The doctors passed into another room. For half an hour we sat thus in silence. There was no sound but the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece, and through the closed door the muffled voices of men. Then the door opened and a priest came out. He had been administering the last sacrament and hearing the last confession. His face was grave but kind. As he passed, he laid his hands upon the head of the Princess.

"Be brave, my child," he said, "and do as your conscience directs. For the next few days I am always at hand to help you. Perhaps the voice of God may deign to speak through my lips. May His blessing be with you." And with these words he passed on. I could see that he

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was strangely moved for a man who had seen much death and heard many deathbed confessions, but the seal of silence was on his lips, and he would carry a secret to his grave.

"He will see you now," said the Princess in a low voice. "If his strength fails, give him some of the medicine by his side."

I opened the door, and, closing it behind me, found myself in a large square room, completely furnished and decorated in the purest white. The carpet, curtains, wall paper, furniture, rugs, were all of the same colour, and whitest of all was the face of John Silver. He was propped up on great pillows, and his eyes were fixed on the dark outline of the window, which faced the North.

I went to his side and took one of his great wasted hands in my own. The dying man scarcely seemed to notice the action, for he did not turn his head.

"Mr. Silver," I said in a low voice, "I am here—Dr. Silex." The man turned his white face, and I shuddered as I looked into his dark and burning eyes.

"John Silver? John Silver?" he said in a faint voice. "Who calls the Lord of Argenteuil by that name? Who"—then a sudden gleam of recognition came into his face, and I felt a slight pressure on my fingers. "I remember now," he continued, "you must pardon me. I was dreaming. This is a sad business, Dr. Silex."

"My poor friend," I murmured, "I know something of what this means to you. Yet perhaps in a year's time many of us will be praying for rest."

"I wish to speak to you of that," he continued, in short gasping sentences. "This is no time for regrets—though it is hard to die—just as one's hopes and ambitions are about to be realised. The hours are few. Will you respect the wishes—of a dying man, Dr. Silex?"

"I will, with all my heart," I answered.

"The expedition must leave," he murmured, "directly

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after my burial. There is no time to be lost. I wish my body to be burnt. The ashes you will take with you. They must rest in the most Northern point you reach. Promise me this."

"I swear it," I replied.

"Then the Princess," he continued, in so faint a voice that I could scarcely catch the words, "she will be alone. Will you guard her—serve her faithfully—protect her from harm?"

"With my life, if need be," I said fervently, and then stopped, anxiously watching the man's face. A great shadow was falling upon it, and the light seemed to be flickering in the eyes. Quickly I measured out some medicine and poured it between the white lips. He gave a deep sigh, and a faint flush of colour came into his cheek and died away again.

"Thank you, Dr. Silex," he said, "I shall die more easily—knowing she is in your hands. I trust you. Perhaps in the future you will influence the destiny of a kingdom."

"Will you not tell me your secret?" I said gently. "If I am to help effectually, I should have perfect knowledge."

"Not yet, not yet," he whispered. "I am on my death-bed, and have told it to the priest of God. I have also told the Princess that which she did not know before to-night. I have laid on her young shoulders a burden which none but the bravest and noblest of women could bear. She has consented to bear it—for my sake. She will need all your help. Before you have finished your voyage, she will herself tell you the object I have in view. But I dare not tell you now. You are an honourable man, you would feel obliged to tell your companions. I will not weight you with this secret. You shall all know together, and choose whether you will proceed or turn back. It will all lie in your own hands."

"Perhaps you are right," I replied. "And if the Prin-

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cess knows—that is enough for me.” We were both silent for more than a minute. He gripped my hand, and his eyes were once more turned to the window.

“Turn down the lamp,” he said suddenly, “and open the window. I would see the stars.”

“It is a bitter night,” I said.

“It does not matter,” he replied, “unless you are afraid of the cold.”

I rose and turned the lamp down low, till there was only a faint flicker of firelight on the walls. Then I threw open the window, and the cold air came rushing into the apartment. It was a clear night. The moon was not yet up, and the whole square patch of sky twinkled with points of light. I returned to the bedside, and once more grasped John Silver’s hand.

“There lies the North,” he said, “under those same stars. My body is here, but my spirit has outstripped this broken shell; it has passed the smoke of London and the shores of England; passed the wide ocean and the eternal snows of Greenland; it is now on the shores of the Great Frozen Sea. Now it has crossed the great waste of impassable and everlasting ice. It has reached its home.”

I looked through the window, and a strange thing happened to me. The white room began to melt and change into a wide vista of snowbound valleys and mountains. The stars flared up and flickered like tongues of fire, and there in the distance, at the boundary of a great plain of ice, stood the white walls and towers of a large city. But the delusion was only momentary. I turned away my head and closed my eyes, and when I looked again, the stars were shining in the dark sky, and the firelight was once more flickering on the walls.

“Did you see it?” he said in a low voice.

“I saw it,” I answered.

“You saw it through my eyes,” he said. “Perchance one day you will see it with your own. Farewell, Dr.

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Silex, I would be alone with the Princess until the end comes. Farewell, my friend. Through you I hope to live again, and fulfil her destiny and my own."

"Farewell, John Silver," I said, still holding his hand; "if it is the will of God, I will do all you yourself would have done. I took your place by force for the sake of my own pride and new-found strength. I will hold it now for your sake—and for hers."

I loosed the cold, thin hand, and left the room. In the next apartment I found the Princess with her face buried in her hands. The two doctors were seated in a far corner, and rose as I entered. I crossed over to them.

"He desires to see this lady," I said in a low voice. "Is there absolutely no hope?"

"None," one of them said; "we can do nothing. We may keep him alive for a while by artificial means, but we cannot save him."

"Will you see him now?" I said, "before she goes in?"

"Yes," they replied, and they both entered the bed-room, shutting the door behind them. Then I heard the sound of a window being shut. In ten minutes' time they returned.

"He wishes to see you, madam," said one of them to the Princess. "There is no time to be lost. We will wait here till you call us. Give him the medicine when his strength fails."

She rose from her seat and went into the room. There were no tears on her face now. It was white and calm as death. She looked like some imperial and beautiful statue of ice. The door closed behind her, and once more there was silence, only broken by the ticking of the clock and the low whispers of the two doctors.

For more than an hour we sat in the room and waited. Then we heard a low cry. The door was suddenly flung open, and the Princess rushed into the room. "Quick,

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quick," she cried, "the medicine is of no use. He will not speak."

We hurried to the bedside, but the doctors' efforts were in vain. John Silver never spoke another word, and in less than an hour he was dead. And, looking upon the face of the Princess, I saw that the burden of some great secret had been lifted on to the shoulders of a lonely woman.

CHAPTER VIII

BON VOYAGE!

AT 6.30 on the morning of the third of April, the *Aurora* and her companions moved slowly down the Thames in single file, bound on their long voyage northwards. The expedition departed, as you know, suddenly and quietly, with no farewell speeches or banquets or enthusiasm of any description. It crept out almost like a thief from a house at daybreak. Three reporters who had hung about the docks day and night in the hope of picking up stray scraps of information, were rewarded for their tenacity of purpose, and were the sole representatives of the Press. A few loafers and dock hands raised a feeble cheer, and one or two relatives of some of the men waved their handkerchiefs or pressed them to their eyes. All good-byes had been said a week before, but some of the sailors had hoped for twenty-four hours' notice, and a spell of leave ashore. In this they were disappointed. The orders to sail were only given at ten o'clock the previous night.

I stood on the bridge with Captain Thorlassen, and watched the muddy water as it was churned up in a long yellow streak behind us. It was a bright morning, and the thousand spires and domes of the great city stood out clearly in the sunlight. In the distance I could see the glittering glass of the Crystal Palace, and the wooded heights of Bromley. Close at hand I saw miles upon miles of small houses and great chimneys with their fringe of wharves. When I looked west, the city seemed vast

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and illimitable. Yet in the east I could see the flat marshes of Plumstead, and the waterway seemed to widen out into a promise of sparkling waves and salt breezes. I turned my back sharply upon the west, and idly wondered how many years would pass before I should see it again.

The *Aurora* was a fine boat of about 500 tons. She was fitted with first-class engines, and carried two masts and a full complement of sails, for her coal was to be used sparingly, and only when it was absolutely necessary. She would coal again at St. John's, Newfoundland, and after that would have to trust to such fuel as she could collect, and such winds as Providence sent her. She was the finest vessel in the fleet, and besides the valuable lives of the Princess and Captain Thorlassen, she carried on board the ashes of John Silver and £820,000 in gold.

Every detail of the route to Cape Alfred Ernest had been carefully mapped out and arranged among the several captains. It was not to be hoped that the fleet could keep together, and it was agreed that if they separated, they should assemble at various fixed points on the route, and wait for each other before proceeding to the next point. It was, however, laid down as a general axiom that no vessel should be more than a mile from at least one of its companions. This procedure would necessarily hamper individual progress, inasmuch as the strength of a chain is that of its weakest link; but it was absolutely necessary, at any rate in the earlier part of the journey, if anything like a combined attack was to be made on the northern ice.

For the first day or so the Princess spoke neither to me nor to Captain Thorlassen, and expressed all her wishes through her maid. But on the third day she emerged to some extent from the solitude of her sorrow, and intimated her desire to take her meals with us, and for the first time she gave me some indication of her great mental

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powers and abilities. Her conversation was marked by a certain quiet dignity, but was otherwise calculated to set us entirely at our ease. It was a strange mixture of knowledge and ignorance. In some matters she was as ingenuous as a child, in others she showed a depth of reasoning and extent of reading which would not have disgraced a grey-haired professor.

She had dropped the vague and dreamy manner which had characterised her words and actions in Silent Square, and there was no longer that restless and uncertain look in her eyes which had filled my heart with so much pity and sorrow. Her conversation showed that she was not only perfectly sane, but that she was a woman of extraordinary intellect. A great burden was taken off my mind. I had loved her in spite of everything, but the thought that I was in love with a mad woman had been almost too terrible for a human mind to bear.

She discussed many matters with us, but she never tired of one particular subject—the route of the ship and the probable success of the expedition. Her own cabin was completely papered with Polar maps, and the voyage of every Arctic explorer was marked upon them. When she found the captain alone, and with an hour of leisure on his hands, she would extract every little detail of his previous Polar expeditions from him, discuss currents, ice packs, and degrees of frost with him, and sit by his side gazing earnestly at a map, as he pointed out his previous voyages, and gave her full reasons for taking the route he had marked out for this one. And for some reason or other Grant Land itself seemed to fascinate her more than any other part of the Polar Area. She asked as many questions about those desolate ice-bound shores as if they had been one of the fairest spots of creation. Captain Thorlassen had been there once, but as his memory of it was confined to a recollection of a dreary waste of snow and ice, in no way differing from a thousand other shores

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in that lonely region, he was unable to answer with much accuracy or enthusiasm. He made no comments on her curiosity, and either did not understand her pertinacity on this point, or else he ascribed it to a certain meaningless obstinacy which was part of his conception of the fair sex. But I stored it up in my mind, and tried to imagine that this country had some connection with her past.

As the voyage proceeded, she won her way into the hearts of every man on board the *Aurora*. She had a kind word and smile for the humblest sailor, and for a whole night she sat by the bedside of young Aldrich, who had broken his leg by falling down a hatchway. Her youth and magnificent beauty might have brought the proudest man in England on his knees to her feet, but it was not till she had descended from the high throne of her reserve, and had showed the tenderness of her womanly nature, that she touched the hearts of these rough seamen. By the time the ship had reached St. John's, I verily believe every man on board would have died in her defence.

The voyage to St. John's was accomplished in ten days, and for a whole week we all lived like fighting-cocks. Our fame had preceded us, and from the moment that we landed to the hour when more than half the population waved their farewells from the quay, our existence was a round of fêtes and banquets. We drank the cup of civilisation to the dregs, knowing that many months—perhaps many years—would elapse before we could raise it to our lips again.

The Princess alone shrank from the proffered hospitality. It was, of course, known that she was on board the *Aurora*, and small boats containing enthusiastic reporters from New York and Boston hovered round the ship all day in the hope of catching a glimpse of her. They saw a tall, slender figure in deep mourning pacing the deck, but her face was so muffled up with furs that it was impos-

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sible to see the features. This, however, did not prevent various portraits of her appearing in the Sunday papers, and these pictures were all that the Newfoundlanders ever saw of her. The Governor's wife wrote her a special and pressing invitation to a private lunch, but it was declined on the ground of her recent bereavement. However, I myself interviewed the reporters, and to the best of my ability concocted several satisfactory reasons for a woman undertaking so long and perilous a voyage.

We left St. John's on the 27th of April. As you may have read in the papers, it was a scene of unparalleled enthusiasm in that place. The bells rang out merrily; flags were flying on every tower in the town and on every mast in the harbour, and even the departing ships were decked with such small stock of bunting as they possessed. A vast crowd thronged the wharf, and the Governor himself came down and shook Captain Thorlassen and myself by the hand before we stepped into the boat which was to take us to the ship. Then, a few minutes later, the fleet began to move slowly down the harbour. The steam sirens hooted. A single gun from the fort answered the salute, and the white smoke drifted across the sea. Thousands of handkerchiefs were waved, hats thrown in the air, and cries of "Good luck" and "*Bon voyage*" were yelled across the water. I stood upon the bridge with Captain Thorlassen and watched the figures of the crowd melt away into a blurred mass of black. Then, an hour later, the city itself faded into a faint blot of smoke, and finally the long coast line sank down into the sea, and there was nothing about us but the heaving swell of the Atlantic.

I turned away and went down to the cabin full of a strange and unreasonable sorrow. I could not share the enthusiasm of my brave and hopeful companions. They only saw before them the perils of a dangerous expedition, and danger was the salt of their lives. But I, who knew

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more than they, and yet not enough for my peace of mind, was obliged to wonder what task lay before us, and whether the terrors of the dark and frozen sea might not fade into insignificance beside some awful danger that I could not yet imagine. I began to think that I was a coward. Perhaps my nerves had grown weak from years of study and a sedentary life. I had no fear of hardship, and the thought of intense cold and starvation did not trouble me; yet on that bright spring afternoon, when I saw the land die away on the horizon, I felt as though I were being swept away from all tangible things into an unknown darkness.

CHAPTER IX

THE FROZEN NORTH

THE wind was fair behind us, blowing strongly from the south, and before night came on, the fires in our furnaces were allowed to go out, and we made a good eight knots an hour towards the North under a full spread of canvas.

This breeze continued for six days. On the seventh we saw our first ice, and as the berg sailed majestically past us we drank its health with full glasses, and gave three cheers in its honour.

A day later we saw a great quantity of ice, and it was no easy work steering our course through the bergs and floes that dotted the sea as far as the eye could reach. Captain Thorlassen had the fires re-lit, and steam was kept up in the boilers. The wind was decreasing in strength and veering to the west. It was quite possible that it would fail us in an emergency. The sea, however, was still open, and though it was beginning to grow very cold, the Captain assured me that we should meet with no obstacle to our progress for several days to come.

Only six of the vessels were in sight, and it was quite evident that we could outsail all the rest of the fleet. In fact, when we reached Godhaven two days later, we had to wait twenty-four hours before the last and slowest of our ships arrived. At this port we took in a supply of fresh meat, and again sailed into the North.

Davis Strait was now thick with drifting floes, and we made slow progress to Upernavik, which we reached in

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four days' time. Here we had again to wait, and on this occasion for a week, one of our vessels having damaged her bows against a piece of ice. The few inhabitants of the place were most hospitable, though our large numbers prevented us from presuming on their hospitality. We should have eaten them out of hearth and home if we had accepted all they offered us. They gave us a roaring send-off, every man, woman and child turning out to see our departure, and we looked back upon the little settlement with mingled feelings of pleasure and regret. They had been very kind to us, and it was the last kindness we were likely to experience at the hands of any living creature for two or three years to come.

On May 21st we again set our faces towards the North. The ice was now becoming more than troublesome, and for many days we moved so slowly that we could count all our ships in sight. The water was thickly covered with small floes, but we saw none of the gigantic icebergs that we had encountered farther south. Most of the pieces were too small to menace us with any serious danger, but here and there large low islands, in some cases nearly ten acres in extent, drifted slowly past us. It was not difficult to avoid them, but our progress was of necessity slow. The wind was now in the north-west.

It was not until ten days after our departure from Upernavik that we accomplished the crossing of Melville Bay, and rounded Cape York. Here a comparatively open stretch of sea lay before us, but far away on the Northern horizon the trained eye of Captain Thorlassen noticed a white reflection on the clouds, and he told me that probably the ice pack was not far off. He was right in his conjecture. In two days' time we steamed slowly into another mass of small floes and bergs, and saw in the distance a long white line like the coast of a frozen shore. When we came closer, we saw that it was a solid barrier of ice, and knew that the battle had begun.

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We steamed a few miles south, and waited until the rest of the fleet came in sight. Then for a whole week we cruised east and west in the hope of finding some open channel in the ice. We were now in Murchison Sound, latitude 75.50° N., and it would indeed be hard if we could not get farther north with three months of summer before us. However, for the present there appeared to be no opening of any sort, and personally I was thankful that there was no inducement to us to make a rash attempt through a narrow passage. We should probably have been nipped in the ice.

We cruised backwards and forwards from Whale Sound to Cape Clarence, eagerly watching day after day for some break in the ice, but the wind was now blowing steadily from the North, and, so far from advancing, we were actually obliged to retreat before the moving pack. We finally resolved to take shelter to the south of Cape Clarence, and to anchor 200 yards off the black and inaccessible cliffs of North Lincoln Land.

It was well that we had moved our ships into this shelter, for before we had been there twenty-four hours the north wind freshened into almost a gale, and the whole pack was swept forward with incredible rapidity. If we had been out in the open Straits we should have had to fly south before the enormous body of ice, and perhaps have lost a month of the precious summer-time before we could regain our present position.

As it was, the movement of the pack appeared to fill the heart of everyone with hope. Captain Thorlassen said that it might sweep by entirely and disperse in the broad waters of Baffin's Bay, leaving an open sea behind it, and that even if it did not actually pass us, it would be sure to leave a channel on one side or the other.

The breaking-up of this solid block of ice, as it swept past the point that sheltered us, was one of the most magnificent spectacles I had ever seen. I stood on the bridge

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and watched the gigantic forces of nature in silent admiration, not unmixed with fear at our proximity to the evidence of their enormous strength.

The *Aurora* was only a quarter of a mile round the point, which ran out almost due east, and was right across the progress of the ice pack. The other ships were in single file behind us at distances of 100 yards apart. We were, therefore, in the post of danger, if the ice should happen to spread westwards, but we were also in the best position to see the full effect of this tremendous force striking against an immovable barrier of rock.

The cliffs here were of black basalt, and ran sheer into the deep water of the sea from a height of nearly 500 feet. The extreme point was smooth, and so hollowed out by the friction of the ice of centuries that the summit of the cliff overhung the base by quite fifty feet. On this cape the whole gigantic force of the ice-pack bore down with a pressure that it was almost impossible to estimate. It must, however, have been many thousands of tons to the square foot. The noise was so terrible and so continuous that I was forced to stop up my ears with my hands. It was like the incessant crash and roar of a prolonged and deafening explosion. The very foundations of the earth seemed to be shaken. At the foot of the cliff huge broken fragments of rock, twenty or thirty feet in height, were shifted like pebbles on the beach, and rolled into the deep water on the south side of the cliff. The ice itself, though more than twenty feet in thickness, split up like a pane of broken glass, and the pieces were slowly pushed one on the top of each other till a mountain fifty yards in height, and twice as thick again at the base, was heaped up against the wall of basalt. Then the whole structure would slide and collapse, and great waves, like the swell of the Atlantic, would come rolling towards us. Then, foot by foot, the mountain would once more be raised against the cliff, and again it would go tottering and crashing into the sea.

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It was a wonderful sight. It seemed as though nothing on earth could have resisted the enormous pressure of the ice. An iron-clad would have been cracked like a nut. The strongest wall of cement ever raised by human hands would have been ground into dust. But the basalt cliff stood firm, though when I saw pieces as big as a man's body chipped out of its edge like scraps of marble knocked off by a sculptor's chisel, I began to think that the whole mass of rock might possibly give way and bury us in its ruins.

Before night, however, the pack had passed by, and the wide field of ice stretched to the south as far as the eye could reach. Behind it roaring and grinding floes were tossed about in the water like huge corks. I and Captain Thorlassen never left the bridge for twenty hours, and all through the night we heard the crashing of the ice as it beat against the cliffs.

Then, when morning came, we saw the open sea to the North, and all hands were piped on deck. The signal was given to the fleet, the men cheered, and in less than half an hour we were once more steaming northwards.

For several days we made steady progress. The wind shifted into the southwest, and we saved our coal, running nearly ten knots an hour under full canvas. We passed up the whole length of Smith Sound without encountering any more serious obstacles than a few small bergs. On July 10th we passed 80° N., and Grinnell Land lay on our left. Open water was still before us, and it looked as though we might possibly winter well north of Grant Land, though Captain Thorlassen shook his head when the more optimistic of his officers suggested the possibility of such a happy event.

Our life on board ship was by no means dull or monotonous. There was always the excitement of avoiding the floes of ice, and the keen pleasure of wondering what lay before us. There was also plenty of amusement

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on board every ship, for one of the first rules of Arctic exploration is to keep up the spirits of the men. For myself, I had two congenial companions, whose society I would not have exchanged for that of any other two people in the world, except, perhaps, yourself, Cordeaux.

Captain Thorlassen was a man whom it was impossible not to admire and respect, though his nature was as different from mine as fire from water. I was attracted to him from the very first by his simple and manly qualities. I imagine that the old Vikings of the north were cast in a similar mould. His rugged face, huge frame, and absolute insensibility to all fear, made him seem like some demi-god or hero of the remote past; in physique, a king of men, in nature half a savage and half a child. He ruled the expedition with a rod of iron, but every man under him would have followed him to the death.

My other companion was the Princess, who of all the thousand people embarked with us on this perilous enterprise was allied to me not only by sympathy of class and intellect, but by a stronger bond, of which she herself knew nothing. For she alone of all the women I had ever met was the one I desired to share my life with me. I was not a boy, Cordeaux, and you well know that women have had no place in my existence. I am no amorous driveller to burden you with her praises, or with any account of how she took her place in my heart. I simply tell you that I loved her.

But I did not see much of her during our voyage. Directly she entered the northern sea, she froze her nature into the coldness of queenly dignity and inaccessible pride. She apparently wished to mould herself to her surroundings, and I tell you, Cordeaux, that the North Pole itself did not seem so far off, and so hemmed in with everlasting ice, as her heart appeared to the man who longed to reach it.

Hour after hour I watched her pace along the deck in

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solitude, her eye fixed always on the North, her bearing that of no ordinary woman who had set out on a long voyage from mere curiosity, but rather that of one who waits and watches for something or someone that she loves. We were all her devoted servants. The men saluted her as though she were an admiral of the fleet. Captain Thorlassen himself, the indisputable ruler of us all, was as humble in her presence as a child; and I—well, from what I have told you, Cordeaux, you will understand that she was something more than a queen to me.

Yet love is not so blind that it asks only to see the external form of that which it loves. I passed many a sleepless night as we ground our way through the crush of ice, and wondered hour after hour about her past, trying to guess what mystery surrounded her, and what strange web of circumstances had been woven about her life. The awful thought would sometimes come to me that my first impression might not be altogether wrong, and that she was really deluded with the idea that she was a queen of some country which only existed in her own brain; but these thoughts were only imaginations of the night. One had only to see her beautiful face, bearing all the stamp of power and intellect, to realise that such fears were groundless. There was, however, much cause for anxiety and wild conjecture, and day by day I waited, Cordeaux—waited for I knew not what.

Our voyage proceeded without much hindrance through the north water until August the first, when we passed through Robeson Channel and turned due west along the north coast of Grant Land. Then once more we saw the white bank of ice on the horizon. Captain Thorlassen at once expressed an opinion that we had reached the limit of our voyage, and that all further advance would have to be made by sledges. In a few hours we reached the pack, and saw that it extended north as far as the eye could reach. It was the great Frozen Sea itself.

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We waited here for two days until the whole of the fleet had assembled, and, hugging the coast of Grant Land, where there was still a narrow channel of water, made our way slowly mile by mile, expecting every day to be shut out from further advance or retreat. We had on the way established six huge depots of provisions on the coast of Grant Land, and had thus furnished a line of retreat in case of accident.

On August the sixth a terrible disaster took place, which threw a gloom over the whole fleet. On this date the ice began to close in behind us, and, looking eastward from the bridge, we saw that our last four vessels were likely to be caught between the pack and the shore. To our great relief the *North Star* and the *Loch Awe* just squeezed through, the latter with the loss of her rudder and screw.

The *Petrel* and *Sandsvall* were, however, not so fortunate. The latter was nipped between the shore ice and the pack, and we saw her slowly flung to one side as the pressure forced her clean out of the water up the slope of a great berg. The men rushed from her like rats, saving what they could. They were not a moment too soon, for the pressure suddenly relaxed, and the ship rushed down the ice slope like a toboggan into the gap, masts, sails, and rigging toppling over her like a shroud, and the water flying fifty feet into the air. When we looked again, the pressure had returned, and she was caught like a nut in a pair of crackers. At a distance of half a mile we could hear the bursting of her timbers, and in less than five minutes' time she was flattened out into a shapeless mass of wood and iron.

But a worse fate was in store for the *Petrel* and her unfortunate crew. She had struggled into a small piece of open water between the pack and a huge perpendicular berg which had grounded in fifty fathoms of water off the coast. Suddenly, without any warning, the ice pack

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closed in so swiftly on her that only half a dozen men had time to jump overboard. Then there was a blinding flash, a volume of black smoke that hid everything from view, and a second or two afterwards a report like the discharge of a thousand cannon, and a shock that flung several of us on our faces. The whole thing was almost like a clap of the hands in its rapidity.

When the smoke cleared away, the whole vessel was buried from sight in a gigantic pile of débris that had been blown clean out of the face of the berg, in the side of which appeared a deep rent half an acre in extent. It was evident to Captain Thorlassen and myself what had happened. The sudden and tremendous shock had struck her store of dynamite and nitro-glycerine on the berg, like a hammer might have struck them on an anvil.

Men made their way from nearly every ship to give assistance, but not a living thing remained; nor, indeed, any trace of human existence beyond a few charred and blackened fragments flung out several hundred yards across the ice. We held a funeral service on the spot, out of respect to the dead, then we rescued the survivors of the *Petrel* from the land, and distributed them among the various ships.

This incident gave rise to a considerable discussion among the men, and some of them said they were not going to continue the voyage with a powder magazine beneath their feet. The matter was, however, smoothed over, and Captain Thorlassen told them that a large stock of explosive was necessary for the blasting of the ice. He added that the *Petrel* was carrying more than her share.

I will not worry you, Cordeaux, with a detailed account of our advance during the next month, nor of our daily struggles with the ice. It is sufficient to say that fortune favoured us with a better passage along the coast than we had ever expected, and making our way slowly west, we

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skirted along the north coast of Grant Land through a narrow and shifting channel of open water.

On September 2nd we reached an opening in a big black wall of cliff. It was not more than one hundred feet in width, and appeared to be the entrance to a land-locked harbour several acres in extent. We had no doubt that this was the spot indicated by John Silver as a place of refuge, and we were fortunate to have reached it before the northern ice closed in upon the land. As it was, we had to blast away many hundred tons of ice before we could effect an entrance into the channel, and the *Aurora* was the only ship destined to spend the winter in this snug retreat. The other vessels were all to the east, and one or two of them so far behind us that we could only see their masts. They were one and all bound in the ice or driven up among the loose bergs on the shore.

The place where we expected to spend many dreary months was about twenty miles further west than the point Aldrich reached on sledges on the Nares Expedition of 1876. The little harbour, which ran almost due east and west, was large enough to have held our entire fleet, if they could have reached it. On two sides great perpendicular cliffs rose from the water to the height of over five hundred feet. Towards the shore the ground sloped inland more gradually, and on the east there was another solid wall of rock with a single opening to the sea.

The land to the south of us was white and desolate, as far as the eye could reach. To the west we could trace the coast line extending in a series of headlands for quite fifteen miles, and we reckoned that the furthest of these headlands was Cape Alfred Ernest. To the north lay the Great Frozen Sea, the Palæocrystic Ocean, whose eternal ice had for all time barred the way to the North Pole.

I must confess, as I gazed towards the north, I experienced no small emotion. Up to the horizon stretched a vast expanse of rugged ice hummocks, piled and moulded

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into every conceivable shape and form. Beyond that horizon the mind could only speculate. There, perhaps, was another lonely and desolate land; perhaps an open sea; perhaps only the same monotonous stretch of ice. There was room for much fanciful conjecture about the six hundred odd miles that lay between us and our destination, and for me there was a weird fascination in watching that terrible and unconquerable barrier of frozen hill and plain.

There was still open water in places, and progress from one ship to another was difficult. But in less than a fortnight's time every scrap of water was frozen over, and at the end of another week it was firm and hard to the foot. The daylight was fast disappearing, and every hand on board worked their hardest to get the ship into order for the winter. Awnings were erected, ropes and spars were trimmed, huts made out of ice blocks were built on the shore, all explosives stored on the land, snow shovelled a foot deep on the deck for warmth, and a thousand other arrangements made to give us a certain degree of comfort, and even to defend our bare lives against the coming ordeal. For a long and cold night was before us, and it might be that a good many of us would never see the sun rise again.

CHAPTER X

THE ARROW HEAD

TWO months of darkness passed by, and it is unnecessary for me to recount the experiences which are the common lot of all explorers. The daily routine of the ship was carried out with scrupulous exactitude. The men were exercised by sharp walks on the shore and drilled with dumb-bells between decks. There were also the usual sledge expeditions, in which the men endured severe privations, and even intense physical agony, with scarcely a murmur. On one of these three men lost their lives through frost bites.

Shortly after the darkness set in, we made an important discovery. A mile inland Captain Thorlassen came across a thick seam of coal. The outcrop itself was of considerable extent, and with the aid of pickaxes, drills, and dynamite, a huge store of this valuable mineral soon lay at our disposal. We excavated many hundreds of tons, which we stacked in heaps on the shore; and the quantity we had in sight was so enormous that Captain Thorlassen resolved to make use of it in a manner which a practical man would have condemned as a waste of good material, but which I am firmly convinced did much to mitigate the gloom of those long winter months.

We made a square wall of stone, ten feet each way and four feet high, on a broad slab of rock near the sea. We filled this entirely with coal, and lighted a huge fire, which we kept going through all the darkness of the long night.

The Princess Thora

As far as warmth went, it was no more than a spark in an ice house, but the mere sight of it filled the heart of every man with joy. The blazing coal fire is to every Englishman a touch of home, and a reminder of his own hearthstone. And not a man of us, as he looked at that crackling, roaring mass of flame and white hot coal did not feel the happier for the welcome union. It was never allowed to go out. A shift of ten men were told off to attend to it, and the shift was changed every hour. Not a man complained of the work, and most of them would have done duty for eight hours at a stretch. It was a real pleasure to these poor frost-bound fellows to heap coal on to that blazing pile, and they experienced much of the glory of conquest as they fought the cold and darkness with that pyramid of warmth and light. It shone far into the night over fields of sparkling ice and snow, and spoke something for man's efforts amid the gigantic opposing forces of nature.

Nothing particular happened until the beginning of December, when we made two or three discoveries of considerable interest. On one of our sledge expeditions we reached 82.9° North, and were just about to return to the ship, as our provisions were running short, when Captain Trondall, who was in command of the *Firefly*, drew my attention to some small footprints on the newly fallen snow. I could not distinguish what they were in the faint starlight, but I could see that they marked the track of some small animal going north. Everyone examined them with interest, and I was told they were the footprints of a hare. Now the Arctic hare is rarely found so far north, and it was not at all likely that this particular one was wandering away from land across the Great Frozen Sea without some definite object in view. That object apparently lay to the north across the almost impassable barrier of ice. And a great hope filled our hearts that somewhere in that vast unoccupied region lay the shores of an

The Arrow Head

undiscovered land. We traced the footmarks for several miles, to see if they doubled back to the south, but they still continued their course northwards, and, fearing for the safety of several of our men who were very ill with scurvy, we were obliged to abandon our search and return to the ships.

A few days afterwards one of our expedition brought home a large quantity of mud and small red stones which they had found out on the ice beyond the eighty-third parallel. It was not improbable, said Captain Thorlassen, that this had been carried from the shores of some island still further north, as the drift of the pack was southwest. But, on the other hand, it might have come from the coasts of Siberia or Spitzbergen. There was certainly no similar stone to be found on the shores of the land which was sheltering us through the winter.

But towards the end of December Captain Thorlassen and I made a still more interesting discovery within five miles of our little harbour. We had gone out by ourselves to see if we could get any fresh meat for our scurvy patients, one or two of whom were suffering horribly. It was almost a vain hope, as so far we had seen nothing larger than two hares and a few lemmings during our sojourn on the coast of Grant Land.

As we were returning home, however, we saw a curiously-shaped lump on the smooth white surface of a little valley between two steep hills. We scraped away the snow with the butts of our rifles, and came across the body of a musk ox, which had probably been dead some months, as the animal only wanders so far north in the summer time. It was perfectly fresh, and frozen as hard as a block of stone. We were, as you may imagine, overjoyed at the discovery, for it meant at least a pound or two of fresh meat for everyone of our sick men.

"Let us go back at once, Thorlassen," I said, "and get a sledge."

The Princess Thora

He did not answer me, but remained on his knees by the animal's head, scraping away at the skin and pulling at something; then he placed our lamp close to the hairy jaw, and uttered an exclamation of surprise. I came up to him and looked. A piece of yellow wood, half an inch in diameter, was sticking out of the flesh. It was smoothly polished, but the end had apparently been broken off short. It looked like part of an arrow.

We got out our clasp knives and hacked at the skin and bone to loosen it. It was hard work, and it was more than ten minutes before I drew it out with my fingers. It was an arrow head, and so hard had it struck its victim that more than nine inches were buried in the bone and muscle of the animal's head.

"Eskimo?" I queried. Captain Thorlassen took it from me and examined it under the lamp.

"No Eskimo made that," he said; "and no Eskimo bow would have driven it nine inches into the skull."

"But surely," I replied with a smile, "no civilised race would use a thing like that."

"No," he said thoughtfully, turning the piece of wood over and over and examining it under the lamp, "I do not see why they should. But I will wager this arrow was never made by an Eskimo, unless it were by some tribe of which I have never heard, and I have been in most parts, and met thousands of them from time to time. However, the meat is of more importance than the arrow."

We made our way back to the ship, dispatched a sledge party, and before many hours were over, our patients were revelling in fresh meat, and there was a sparkle of appreciation in the eye of many a weary man as he smelt the flesh frizzling over the fire.

We said nothing of the arrow head to anyone; but Captain Thorlassen kept the incident in his mind, and dispatched a large number of expeditions to scour the surrounding country, ostensibly in search of food, but

The Arrow Head

really in the hope of discovering some signs of the existence of a human being in this lonely and frozen land.

The parties returned without having even seen the tracks of any animal, but with various stories of other discoveries which they thought worthy of mention.

One man had picked up a piece of stone weighing, perhaps, two pounds, and having one side fashioned into a sharp edge. Another party had discovered an ice cave concealed by snow among the mountains, in which were the remains of a fire. Another had actually found a complete arrow similar to the piece we had pulled out of the musk ox. It was four feet in length, tipped with albatross feathers, and could only have been drawn to its full extent by a person of gigantic strength and reach of arm. Another party reported that far away on the western horizon they had seen a faint and flickering spark of red light, which might have been a fire. It was quite evident, from all these circumstances, that some human being was on this lonely land beside ourselves.

But what manner of man he was, and why he had not already paid us a visit, were questions to which we were unable to find a satisfactory answer. It was almost certain that he must have known of our existence. Our coal furnace blazed to heaven with such brilliance that anyone within a radius of twenty miles must have seen it; and a thousand men cannot lie hid on a white and desolate tract of country, like a lot of brown snakes in a valley of rocks.

Day after day we examined the surrounding country, but found nothing further, though often when I peered into the wall of darkness, expecting someone to emerge into our little circle of light, I imagined that I heard faint footsteps crunching on the snow, and experienced a sensation of being watched by someone I could not see.

CHAPTER XI

THE LONELY MAN OF CAPE ALFRED ERNEST

TOWARDS the end of January the cold grew so intense that it was impossible for us to leave the ship for more than an hour at a time. All thought of expeditions was abandoned, and the men only left the warmth of their quarters to take brief and violent exercise on the mainland. It was a trying time for all of us, and I felt as though a huge ball of darkness had entombed us for all time, and that the light would never come to us again. However, we had plenty of amusement and work; and if it had not been for the awful depression and the scourge of scurvy, which we had not been able to successfully combat, we should, I think, have been fairly comfortable. We were absolutely protected from the cold, and as snug as human ingenuity could make us.

The Princess bore all the hardships and gloom with a courage which was almost incredible in a tenderly nurtured woman. Before the end of December she was the only woman left among a thousand men, for her maid died of scurvy after her mistress had nursed her day and night for a whole week. She was thus placed in a position few women could have endured with any show of fortitude. Her rank and sex placed her absolutely alone.

Yet she showed no signs of fear, and moved among us as a ministering angel; nursing the sick, comforting and cheering the sad, and straining every nerve to brighten the lives of the men. She was a noble woman, Cordeaux, and as I saw her thus struggling against every hardship

The Lonely Man of Cape Alfred Ernest

and peril that a woman could encounter, and yet moving amid it all with a cheerful face and an air of supreme dignity and tenderness, my love for her grew into such reverence as one offers at the shrine of a saint.

I gave her no hint of my secret by outward word or action. Yet I thought it quite possible she had guessed it, for a woman's intuition is said to be keen in such matters, and she may have been equally careful to show no signs of her knowledge. At any rate, she realised that I was her faithful servant in all things; but the same might have been said of so many men in the expedition.

The winter passed by, and when the first sun rose again above the horizon, the blood rushed through our veins with fresh vigour, and our hearts beat with fresh hope.

Fifty-eight of our number who had been with us at the commencement of that long night were not there to see the first faint flush of rose glitter on the fields of snow and hummocks of ice. Twice that number were still sick, but not a man of them was too weak to raise a feeble cheer as he heard the tumult of applause ringing from ship to ship. The night was over, and another long day's work lay before us. We all felt that much would happen in the next six months.

And on April the tenth, something occurred which, as it turned out, influenced the whole future career of both myself and the Lady Thora de Brie.

On that day Captain Thorlassen and myself were on the top of the hill overlooking the harbour, a dreary mass of snow-covered rock some 800 feet in height. He was taking observations, and I was amusing myself by scanning the surrounding landscape with a telescope. At our feet the harbour and the whole coast line stirred with human life. The men were shifting the stores back to their various vessels, and lines of small black figures were passing to and fro in all directions. Inland I could see range after range of round white hills, with here and there the

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black face of a precipice. East and west the coast line faded into an indistinct blur, and seemed to lose itself in the whiteness of the sea. Northwards, the sun glittered on endless hummocks of ice as far as the eye could reach; and it was in that direction that I looked longest and most keenly, wondering whether the summer would break up a path for us along the coast so that we could manœuvre our ships round the frozen sea.

My meditations were cut short by a sharp bark from Flo, one of our Eskimo dogs, who had followed us up the slope. I turned sharply round, and saw Captain Thorlassen gazing intently down the valley, which ran to the southwest. He pointed to a place about a mile distant, and I saw a dark spot moving slowly across the snow. In front of it moved a larger blur of white. It appeared to the naked eye as though a wolf was following a polar bear. On looking through the telescope, however, I saw that it was the figure of a man clothed apparently in white, and that he was dragging a sledge behind him. I handed the glass to Captain Thorlassen.

"Not one of our men," he said, after a pause. "They all had orders to work at the cargoes to-day; and I don't know of anyone that wears white furs."

"It is the man we have found traces of," I replied.

We watched him come nearer and nearer, and Flo barked frantically as the faint south breeze brought the scent to her nostrils. The stranger was concealed from the men below by the hill on which we were standing, and we were the only ones conscious of his approach. He must have noticed us, but he made absolutely no sign to attract our attention, plodding steadily up the side of the hill with long, slow strides, and pulling the sledge carelessly after him with one hand. As he came closer to us, I saw that he was an exceedingly tall man, and that he was clothed from head to foot in dirty white furs, apparently made from the skin of the polar bear.



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In a few minutes he had reached the summit where we stood. We saw with surprise that he was a European, and moved forward to greet him. He bowed his head gravely in acknowledgment of our outstretched hands, and looked at us frankly and fearlessly, but as if doubtful how to address us.

All that we could see of his face proclaimed him to be an exceedingly handsome man; his eyes were of a bright blue, and a piece of light-yellow hair strayed out from under the white fur of his hood. I had no doubt in my own mind, when I looked at his general build and features, that he was some Norwegian who had been wrecked in this desolate region, and who had managed to support life during the winter by his own skill and courage.

"Glad to see you," I cried heartily. "Where do you come from?" The man shook his head. He evidently did not understand.

"What ship have you come from?" said Captain Thorlassen, in Norwegian. "Can we help you? Have you any comrades?" The man still shook his head.

Then Captain Thorlassen, who was a practical linguist of no mean order, knowing the few most necessary questions in about fifty different languages, plied him with Dutch, Eskimo, Samoyed, Russian, Danish, Swedish, German, and finally in French.

But the man did not seem to understand any of them, though his eyes brightened a little at the Captain's French, and he seemed to be trying to follow what was being said.

Then he suddenly began to speak quickly and earnestly, accompanying the words with gestures, and pointing first to the west, then to the shores below us, and then to the north. I could not at first understand what he said, but as he proceeded, an idea crossed my mind that I had heard some language like this before, and I puzzled my brain to recall the circumstances.

"Speak more slowly," I said distinctly. Then, remem-

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bering that he did not understand English, I spoke very slowly in French, pausing between each word and pointing to his mouth. He stopped and looked at me for a minute, and then proceeded with his story, or whatever it was. I listened for a minute attentively; then I gave a cry of surprise, and burst into a hearty laugh. He was speaking in old Norman French.

You may remember, Cordeaux, that some five years ago I made a study of this language for the sole purpose of editing an early manuscript of French ballads. I recognised several words now that they were spoken slowly, but, as I had never heard the language spoken, I could not understand what he was talking about. It was also impossible for me to form any intelligent question, but a sudden idea struck me that if he spoke Norman French he might understand Latin; and I asked him in the best Ciceronian who he was and where he came from. He looked puzzled for a moment, and I repeated the question, this time very slowly and with the French accentuation of the vowels.

His face brightened at once, and he answered me, but I only caught one word clearly, and that was the name of "De Brie." I looked at him in astonishment. What did this snow-clad man, cast away on an ice-bound coast, know of the Lady Thora de Brie?

"Who is he?" Captain Thorlassen said gruffly. "What does he want, and what sort of language does he speak; and how the devil do you understand it? I thought I knew most languages."

I laughed. "I don't think you know this one," I replied, "it has not been spoken for more than five hundred years. I don't understand it very well myself; but he has mentioned a name we both know very well, and that is the name of De Brie."

The Captain gave a low whistle. "De Brie?" he said, thoughtfully; "that is curious. What does he know

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about the Lady Thora? There is something in this, Dr. Silex. Let us take him back to the ship at once."

I turned to the stranger and, pointing to the vessel below, said we should be glad if he would come with us. He bowed, and we all three walked down the slope in silence. As he strode along between us, his enormous height became still more apparent. The top of my head no more than reached to his shoulder, and his huge form, swathed in thick skins, suggested some giant of the stone age.

As we neared the ship we saw little groups of men looking at us through the telescopes; and when we reached the *Aurora*, we found the whole of the crew looking over the bulwarks.

Captain Thorlassen led the way up the ladder on to the ship, and told a couple of the crew to transfer the sledge and its contents on to the deck. The stranger followed, and gazed somewhat sternly at the men who were pressing close round him and plying him with questions. Captain Thorlassen, however, said a few curt words about a wreck and the sole survivor, and ordered the men to get about their duties.

As they dispersed and left a clear view of the ship, the stranger suddenly gave an exclamation of joy and surprise, and strode rapidly towards the stern of the vessel. We turned round and saw the Princess standing by the bulwarks, with the sunlight streaming full on her beautiful face and crown of golden hair. Her eyes were fixed on the man, as he advanced, with a puzzled expression, as though she were trying to remember something; then quickly her face lit up with a glad smile of welcome, and she moved forward with both her hands outstretched. He grasped them in his own, and for a moment gazed at her hungrily, as if she were some dear friend given back to him from the dead. Then he suddenly dropped on to one knee, and raised her hand to his lips. I was irresistibly

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reminded of my own experience in Silent Square, and there seemed nothing strange in the action. But Captain Thorlassen and all the men looked on in astonishment. Then the man rose to his feet, and I could hear the Princess speaking to him in his own language; and as she spoke a shadow of disappointment crossed his face, and he answered her with one short sentence, in which I could hear the word "De Brie."

Then she spoke again, earnestly, and almost as though she were asking for forgiveness. And, as she spoke, she laid her hand upon his arm and looked up into his face with so much affection and admiration that a throbbing pain went through my heart.

Again they conversed, and she seemed to be explaining something. Then at last his face brightened, and once more he knelt and kissed her hand. The men began to smile, and Captain Thorlassen ordered them off to their duties.

Then the Princess advanced towards us, leaning slightly on the man's arm. I winced, but faced her with a smile.

"Gentlemen," she said, so that we two alone could hear, "this is my cousin, Sir Thule de Brie, a knight of my kingdom, and with royal blood in his veins. Till to-day I thought him dead. If he had died, it would have been for my sake. For five years he has lived with death very near to him, preferring that to dishonour. And he, too, thought me dead. It is scarcely surprising that we should have much to say to each other. But before we leave you, he would grasp your hand in friendship. I have told him of your true and loyal services, of your kindness, and of your earnest desire to accomplish the objects of this expedition, and he would welcome his new comrades."

With these words she turned to the stranger, and he held out his hand. We each took it in turn, and it felt as though beneath the thick fur glove there lay a vice of

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steel. Captain Thorlassen gave a few words of hearty greeting, but I was silent. Then the two left us, and I watched them from the bows with a great pain at my heart. Sir Thule de Brie was looking earnestly into her face; and I could not decide whether his eyes expressed the homage of love or the loyalty of a faithful servant.

CHAPTER XII

THE NARRATIVE OF THE PRINCESS

BEFORE Sir Thule de Brie had been with us three weeks, he was regarded with esteem and admiration by every man in the expedition.

Indeed, at a first glance, no one could help admiring so splendid a figure of a man. I have seen giants before; huge, hulking lumps of fat, or thin drawn laths of skin and bone, but I have never seen such a man as this. He was six feet six and a half in height, and as beautifully moulded as the statue of a Greek god. Every limb was perfect in proportion and symmetry, every muscle was hard as steel, and showed clear cut under his smooth white skin.

For the first two or three days he held himself aloof from the men, and it did not seem as though he was likely to become popular with them; but one day he expressed a desire to join them in their daily sports and exercises, and he gave us some measure of his enormous strength. He threw a sixteen pound shot twenty-two feet further than Captain Bulmer, reputed to be the strongest man in all our expedition; and bent a crowbar in his hands as though it were a piece of wire. Then, to give us some idea of his own warlike accomplishments, he shot an arrow clean through half an inch of steel at a distance of three hundred yards, and cut an iron belaying pin in half with a single stroke of the long two-handed sword he carried among his baggage, and with no more effort than if he had been lopping off a twig with a bill hook. And from that

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day forward the men worshipped him as a hero, and were never tired of watching the evidences of his physical prowess.

And during those three weeks I had considerably added to my knowledge of his language, and found myself able to converse with some freedom, and understand nearly everything that he said. And from knowing him better, I had learnt to like the man and to recognise in him the most sterling qualities of a brave and straightforward gentleman. I heard from the Princess that for five years he had lived alone on the coast of Grant Land, and had endured the awful solitude and semi-starvation of that inhospitable region. And no man could have gone through so much and apparently suffered so little in mind and body without being possessed of powers and qualities almost unknown to us in Europe. But in all the conversation I had with him, not a word escaped his lips as to his mysterious origin, nor did he throw any light on the past history of the Princess, or on her plans for the future.

But whether they talked of the past or the future, it was quite evident that they had much to say to each other. Every day he spent several hours in her company; and I watched them, I am ashamed to say, with a growing sense of pain. The Princess seemed to have thrust me entirely aside. I counted myself lucky if I could get five minutes' conversation with her in the day. But hour after hour she would pace the deck, and De Brie would walk beside her, and neither of them had a word for, or cast a glance at me. Heaven knows that I was not jealous of the man, for splendid creature that he was, he scarcely dared to raise his eyes to her face. But I was jealous of their talk and the business that required it; for whatever affair it was that they discussed, it rose before me as a solid wall, shutting out what I most loved to see. No, Cordeaux, I was not jealous of the man, I would have you note that. Yet he had done my self-esteem much wrong; for who

The Princess Thora

was I to dare to love the Princess, when this man was no more to her than a humble slave?

Captain Thorlassen and I, now thrown more together than ever, discussed the question of these two at considerable length, and with many vague guesses at the truth. It was strange that the Princess had as yet given us no explanations of the rifles and guns we carried in our hold.

It was now the beginning of May, and we were already considering the advisability of getting all the ships into our little harbour, and taking such precautions as John Silver had indicated. None of the captains were in favour of such a course; and, indeed, it seemed folly to waste two of the best summer months cooped up in a great well of rock. But Captain Thorlassen and I had given our word in the matter, and we were quite firm in our resolve to carry it out, if it were possible. I was, moreover, sure in my own mind that Silver would not have laid down such a strange and apparently disadvantageous condition without some very good and sufficient reason, based on his own exclusive knowledge of the locality. His words had been most emphatic, "Your ships must remain in this harbour during the months of June and July." The language was plain enough, though the reason was still far to seek, so on the 1st of May we began blasting the ice around the imprisoned vessels.

By the middle of the month there was already a thin line of water along the coast, and the thermometer was 7° above freezing point; a circumstance which was almost unknown at this latitude, and which in the opinion of many old Arctic navigators presaged some unusual disturbance of the atmospheric conditions. The desolate land to the south of us was showing some signs of life. Small green mosses and lichens appeared in the black rocks, and here and there the tiny flowers of the saxifrage burst into a faint pink bloom. Stray gulls came up from

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the south and circled about our ships in the hope of food. Most of them returned southwards over the land, but a few more adventurous ones flew northwards, over the waste of ice. The atmosphere seemed unpleasantly close and hot to us after the bracing cold of winter. Occasionally there were a few falls of snow, and the ice was covered with a most unpleasant slush. Everything seemed to be damp, and large pools of water formed on the surface of the Frozen Sea.

The unusually mild temperature assisted us materially in our work of freeing the ships. An ordinary Arctic May would have rendered the task almost impossible, for some of our vessels were more than ten miles from us. With the help, however, of nearly a thousand strong workers, and many thousand pounds of dynamite, we finally effected our object. No one worked harder than Sir Thule de Brie, and he won golden opinions from every man in the expedition. He toiled like a common sailor, and many a look of envy and admiration was cast on him as he shifted enormous blocks of ice that no ordinary man could have moved.

By the end of May every ship was in the harbour, and a great ice floe was towed to the entrance and jambed between two walls of rock. But when it was all finished, the men began to grumble, and ask each other for what purpose they had wasted so much time, and such an enormous quantity of valuable explosive. It also began to be rumoured that our holds contained many articles not usually considered necessary for an Arctic expedition, and men whispered of a case that had burst on the *Svelt-holm*, and of an ugly steel muzzle that had showed itself through the gaping timbers.

I told the Princess of these rumours, and on the second of June she asked Captain Thorlassen to call a meeting of all the captains of the vessels, and said that she would then explain everything and place her fate in our hands.

The Princess Thora

We all assembled in the big deck-room of the *Aurora*, twenty men of different nations and various characters, but all bound together by one common purpose. The Princess sat at the head of the table, and by her express desire I was accorded a seat on her right hand, and Captain Thorlassen a seat on her left. The gigantic De Brie refused to sit at the long table, and took his place behind her chair, where he stood as if to guard her, leaning upon his naked sword. I watched the expression in his eyes, and felt sure that he expected difficulties, and was well prepared to meet them.

The Princess was attired more magnificently than I had ever seen her since the day we first met. Her sable jacket was thrown aside, displaying a gorgeous white bodice embroidered with pearls and gold; a circlet of magnificent diamonds sparkled on her hair, and was worn in such a way as to suggest a crown. Her beauty seemed more marvellous than ever, and I do not think there was a man in the room who was not dazzled by the sight of so much loveliness.

When we were all seated in our places she looked at us for a moment, as if measuring the sort of men she had to deal with. Then she began to speak, and I give you her words as nearly as I can remember them, though all the charm of voice and expression that drove them deep into our hearts is lost.

"My friends," she said, in a quiet but firm voice, "I owe you much and have paid you little. You have brought me so far on my journey, and I am grateful to you for your courage and protection. But it is my duty to give you something more than mere thanks, and first of all I wish to offer you some explanation of my presence here to-day.

"It must have occurred to many of you that this is a strange place for a woman, who can be nothing but an encumbrance in an enterprise of this sort. You are risk-

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ing your lives to discover the North Pole. It is a quest that has attracted many brave men, and cost many valuable lives. So far, we have come in safety, but even now there lie between us and our destination 400 miles of ice, a barrier that has never been crossed, and which has been the final and insurmountable difficulty in the path of every explorer. Not a man of you knows what lies beyond that pathless and rugged wilderness; but I know, and Sir Thule de Brie knows, and I will tell you now, and what I tell you will explain my presence here to-day. Beyond the Great Frozen Sea there lies an island five thousand square miles in extent. It is the country of Asturnia, and it has a population of 200,000 people. I am by right of birth queen of that country, though I have been defrauded of my inheritance."

She stopped and looked round the room. The men stared at each other in silent astonishment and manifest unbelief. One or two of them smiled, and I saw a look of pity on the face of Captain Thorlassen. For myself, I saw everything in a new light, and if her words were not the result of a disordered imagination, all the previous mysteries were made plain. This expedition had been equipped and armed with the ultimate object of recovering her kingdom.

"Perhaps," she continued, "I shall not weary you if I tell you my tale from the commencement of my country's existence."

"Aye, aye," said the men in chorus, nudging each other as they spoke.

"In the year 1105," she continued, "there set sail one spring morning from the town of Avranches in Normandy three ships, having on board one hundred men and seventy women and children. They fled from the wrath of Henry I., of England, who, after his victory at Tenchebray, had laid their country desolate with fire and sword, and driven them northward to take refuge on the

The Princess Thora

sea. Among them were some of the noblest families of France, yet with scarce more possessions left to their name than their swords, the clothes they stood up in, their horses, and the ships that were to be their castles and their homes. They pointed their course westwards so as to sail round the coast of France to Gascony and Aquitaine, there to wait till the wheel of fortune turned. But a strong southeast wind arising, they were driven northwards to the inhospitable shores of a land called Munster. Here they fell in with tribes of wild and uncivilized men, no less savage than the great cliffs that formed the bulwark of their land. Our ancestors slew many hundreds of these half-naked barbarians, and having filled their ships with food, set out to sea again, hoping to retrace their course to France.

“But again, so our historian Gaillard tells us, the winds proved adverse, and drove the ships far out into the ocean, where they sailed for more than forty days seeing no land, and in daily peril of their lives from the great waves. They suffered terribly from cold and semi-starvation, and many of the women died. But at last, when despair had begun to settle down upon their hearts, they sighted a bleak and barren land, the name of which has not been handed down to us, but which I have subsequently ascertained to be Greenland. At first it appeared to be totally uninhabited, but after they had landed and built themselves a few rude huts of loose stones, they encountered some of the natives, a thick-set dwarfish race, whom they forebore to slay, because they thought to obtain more provisions by peaceful methods. When they had accomplished this, they again set sail, and again the south winds drove them north; and the cold increased so much that they were glad to make use of the skins which the natives had sold them. And also the historian tells us in quaint language how they first encountered that ice which ever since has been the limit and boundary of our land.

The Narrative of the Princess

"Then his story descends from what is probably true to that which it is hard for a reasonable person to believe. He tells how ten days after they left land the sky darkened and the wind so increased in violence that they ran before it with bare masts. Then suddenly the whole world seemed to tremble and break to pieces. Behind them rose a mountain of water many hundred feet in height, but so smooth on its sides that they were gently lifted to its summit, and saw it roll before them like a mighty wall, tearing the ice into fragments before it, and sucking them after it at so great a pace that men and women lashed themselves to the ships. For three days they swept onwards past crumbling rocks and whirling floes of ice. Then the darkness cleared away, the sun was bright in a blue sky, and they passed gently into a calm and open sea.

"We regard this more as a fable than as an actual account of what occurred. But so much is certain, though it is unknown to anyone in this room but myself and Sir Thule de Brie, that in that open sea lies the land of our birth, the country of Aturnia, and that in our veins flows the best blood of ancient Normandy."

She stopped speaking, and looked round the room with flashing eyes, and her little hands clasping and unclasping with excitement. I saw the faces of the men light up with a sudden enthusiasm and then darken into a sullen frown of disbelief. And then again, as they looked at her face, the light of a wild hope came into their eyes. If what they had heard was true, there was something worth discovering at the North Pole, and there was one in their midst who could lead them to it. I myself was too astonished to either hope or disbelieve. I could only keep my eyes fixed on the face of the woman I loved. But the thought of the guns and ammunition in our holds flashed again across my mind, and then I realised that no child's play was before us; for our destination was a kingdom, and men do not sail for a kingdom, armed to the teeth, in

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search of aught but war. I think some similar thought struck Captain Thorlassen, for I saw his face grow very stern and his lips were closed like a vice.

Then one of the captains cried out, "The North Pole, my lady; the North Pole!"

"Before another winter sets in," the Princess replied, "I hope that we shall all be at the North Pole. I myself will lead you there, if you will follow me. It lies, as far as I can judge, in my kingdom, but—the path to it will be through blood."

Again she stopped, faltering as though afraid to continue. Sir Thule de Brie slightly moved his sword, so that the steel clanked against an iron bolt in the floor. At the sound she proudly threw back her head, and the diamonds in her hair flashed across our eyes like a streak of light.

"My friends," she continued in a low hesitating voice, "I will now in a few words tell you my own story, and you shall choose whether you will be with me in the enterprise which is so dear to my heart. Five years ago my father died. He was the wisest and noblest ruler of our country since the days of Fulk the Great, who gave us our present laws. Yet he died by the hand of his brother in open fight. His loyal followers were routed, and the rebels pursued and slew them till scarce a quarter of their number lived to tell the tale of the defeat. The common people of the country were on the side of my father, for he had raised them out of sordid slavery, and made them men instead of beasts of burden. But they were ignorant and disorganised, and of no avail against the power of the great lords and counts, who were banded together against them. He died like a king, with his dead heaped up around him, and his brother went through the land with a white face and a bloody sword and an accursed soul, slaying till his arm could slay no more, and his tongue was too tired to give the sentence of death.

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"In the confusion, I was taken from the palace by four of my trusty servants, Sir Thule de Brie, the Lord of Argenteuil, Sir Hugh de L'Espece, and Sir Guy Le Mains, and, as it seemed that there was no hope for life in our land, which was running wild with fire and blood, we set forth from a lonely peninsula on the southern shores where a thin barrier of ice runs out from the coast to the Frozen Sea beyond. We took enough food to last us for six months, and also carried away with us some of the crown jewels of Asturnia, and an ancient scroll in the possession of the Lord of Argenteuil, in which he assured me lay the ultimate hope of our return. Then we set off towards the unknown south in the hope of finding some shelter till the nation's madness was overpast. No man had ever set foot on this ice further than ten miles from the land, save one or two criminals flying from justice. The region beyond is known to us as the 'Accursed Land,' which no man may cross and live. Yet we preferred to risk the dangers of that awful wilderness of ice rather than trust ourselves to the mercies of the vile patricide who had gained possession of our land.

"I will not weary you, my friends, with an account of what befell us, nor what perils and hardships we endured. Nor will I tell you the story of how Sir Hugh de L'Espece and Sir Guy Le Mains died in saving me from death—may God rest their souls. I will only say that for three months we wandered south, until we reached the land where you have passed the winter; but, according to Sir Thule de Brie, many miles further west. Here we built ourselves a permanent home in a sheltered ravine and stored our scanty stock of provisions, living on such flesh as my two brave guardians could procure.

"Then one day, when I was a few miles from our camp with the Lord of Argenteuil, a tribe of dwarfed savages swept down upon us, and in spite of the bravery of my companion, who slew ten of them before he was over-

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powered, we were carried away captives towards the south. I cannot describe to you what we endured, nor the savage cruelty with which they tormented my brave and faithful follower. I had some power over their brutal minds, and kept them off from me to the last, when they took out the Lord of Argenteuil and tortured him before my eyes. Then, suddenly, loud shouts burst upon my ears, and then louder reports, and I saw five of our captors fall headlong in the snow and stain it with their blood. A minute later a band of sturdy men rushed up to us, and the Eskimos took refuge in flight. These men were of your race, and to them I owe my life. They treated us with every kindness, and we were sore in need of it. My gallant follower had been so maimed by the cruelty of the savages that the doctor had to cut off both his legs. In the course of many months we reached what I now know to be the land of Canada, and there we lived for nearly a year, perfecting ourselves in the language of its people, and making ourselves acquainted with the great world that had been a sealed book during all the history of our nation. We subsequently journeyed to England and settled down in the capital of that great country.

"And during all this time neither of us breathed a word about our true history. Nor through all these years up to the present day have we said or done anything that might have revealed the secret of our country's existence. We saw the great nations round us armed to the teeth with strange and powerful weapons, their armies countless as the sands, and their hearts filled with a lust of conquest. We feared that a single word from us might send them streaming to the north. The knowledge that a fair country existed in the region of the North Pole might have tempted them to brave the Eternal Ice, and though that terrible barrier might have proved the bulwark of our land, we resolved to expose Asturnia to no risk of subjection to an alien race. It was even better for the Red

The Narrative of the Princess

King to rule than for a stranger to sit on the throne of our people. Dr. Silex and Captain Thorlassen will now understand why I have been silent so long, and why the Lord of Argenteuil only unsealed his lips on his deathbed to a priest of God. But through all these years the expedition has been uppermost in our minds, though we had to wait our time.

"The rest of the story I need not tell you. Most of it is known to Dr. Silex, and I will only tell you that my uncle, Charles the Red, is still King of Aturnia, unless he has already met his fate by the hands of God or his people, and that I—and that I have vowed before heaven to sit upon the throne of that kingdom." She stopped and stretched out her hands appealingly towards us.

"My friends," she continued, "I have tried to make myself one with you. I have prayed for you in your undertakings. I have sympathised with you in all your sorrows and sickness. I am very sick and sore at heart myself. My country and my people wait for me. During these last five years the nobles must have ground them to the dust. My place is with them. My hand is burning to help them and to avenge them. My heart is full of their sorrows and full of the lust of revenge on the man who slew my father. But I am only a woman. I am in your hands. You are powerful—a thousand men of the greatest nation in the world; a nation which is a thousand years ahead of us in intellect and device. You are armed with weapons of destruction unknown to us, and so terribly conceived and planned that the whole army of our kingdom would melt away beneath their breath. You can go anywhere and do anything. And our goal is the same. You desire to stand at the North Pole, and I want my kingdom. I am in your hands."

She stopped speaking. For a moment there was absolute silence. Then, as though a gust of wind had swept

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them from their seats, every man in the room rose to his feet; one crying out that he would follow wherever she might lead, another that he would cut the throats of every rascal in her kingdom, another that he would go to the death for her, till the air of the room rang with shouting and acclamation. I alone was silent, for I could not speak.

Then Captain Thorlassen asked for silence, and the men sat down.

"My lady," he said, "your story is so strange that I can scarcely believe what I have heard; yet I know that you do not speak lightly. For my part, if there is a way to the North Pole, I will tread it. My captains, whom I have the honour to command, have spoken. I have no doubt that the men will not be less certain in their utterances. We are your servants."

Then he sat down, and the men applauded his words with mighty cheers.

"My friends and comrades," she replied, in a trembling voice, "I thank you with all my heart. I am leading you to danger, and perhaps to death. But whatever comes, I will share it with you; and if you set me on the throne that my father occupied, you will not find that Thora of Asturnia will forget the brave fellows to whom she owes all that she possesses."

She held out her hand, and one by one the captains filed out of the room, and raised her fingers to their roughly bearded lips. I was left alone with her and Sir Thule de Brie. She turned to me with a smile.

"I did not hear your voice, Dr. Silex," she said quietly, "and yet you sat very close to me." I raised my eyes to her face but did not answer.

"This is your expedition, and your consent is required for this," she continued. "Why did you not speak?"

I looked her straight in the face, and I almost fancy a faint tinge of colour came to her white, tired face. She turned her eyes away from mine.

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"Dear lady," I said in a low voice, "you know that I am already your servant. There is no need for me to speak. The only need is for me to prove myself in your service."

With these words I kissed her hand, and, making my way into the open air, leant over the bulwarks and looked towards the north. I had much to think of, and was sorely troubled in my mind; for as I recalled all the details of the strange story I had just heard, I could not get rid of the horrible idea that part of the narrative was not true. When the Princess was relating the history and origin of her country, she spoke without pause or hesitation, like one who is merely reciting a passage from a book; but when she came to her own personal story, it struck me that she spoke with fear and trembling, and that this was not altogether due to the painful circumstances of her tale. It seemed to me that her manner was that of a person who is inventing a fable, and not that of one moved by the recollection of distressing events. For instance, it would have appeared almost impossible for a woman who had witnessed the torture of John Silver to have recalled the incident without some expression of pain. She told it with some hesitancy, but I watched her face in vain for any look of horror. These thoughts and suppositions about the woman I loved were very painful to me, Cordeaux, and I tried to thrust them from my mind; but, as I looked towards the north, I began to think that even if the whole story were true, there was still some essential fact or circumstance withheld from our knowledge. I could only comfort myself with the thought that the Princess was acting for the best.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BREATH OF WAR

THE next day the captain of every vessel summoned his men together and told them briefly the story of the Princess, and what assistance she required of them, first speaking in pity of the noble lady in their midst, and then firing them to enthusiasm with the brightly painted pictures of adventurous war, and the attainment of their goal. But the men needed no such spurs, and indeed some sort of bridle would have been more suited to their mood. They shouted and cheered wildly, and I think they would have gone straight to Asturnia, if it had been possible, and tried to tear Charles the Red and his knights to pieces with their naked hands. The long winter life of inactivity had made them as keen for adventure and hard knocks as any roving blade of the middle ages, and down in their rough natures there was a vein of chivalry that would not have disgraced Sir Launcelot himself. They did not stop to ask themselves what chances of success they would have against a trained army of gigantic warriors, cast in the mould of Sir Thule de Brie. They did not even know of the fifteen pounders and the Maxims that were stowed away in the holds of their ships. But they had no desire to think deeply on the matter. They were rough and simple men, looking no further than the fact that the Lady Thora had asked their services; and they had no doubt in their own minds that, armed with a few axes and shot guns, they were a match for any barbarian army in the world.

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Then Captain Thorlassen summoned a great assembly of all the men, and formed them in lines and companies on the snow-clad slope behind the harbour. I myself, as the man who had paid all the expenses of the expedition, spoke a few words to them about the matter we had in hand, and I told them of the cargo we carried in the hold of every vessel. I had intended to apologise for keeping them in ignorance so long, and to point out that no man was compelled to fight with the weapons provided for him ; but at the first mention of the guns and of the ammunition, so great a cheer went up to heaven that I thought it unnecessary to add anything further to my speech.

Then, at the word of command, long lines of rough sailors filed past the Princess, who, with Sir Thule de Brie and Captain Thorlassen, was standing by my side. As they passed one by one, they kissed the hand she extended to them. Then every man returned to his ship ; double rations of food and half a pint of rum was served out to each one of them, and that evening was spent in song and merriment. Never had war been forced on a peaceful community with so little trouble or dissent.

But the next day we had to look to the reality of things. What lay before us was no child's play, and was not to be accomplished either by cheers, or enthusiasm, or kissing of hands. We had already had a long and earnest talk with the Lady Thora and Sir Thule de Brie, and they were not inclined to minimise the task that lay before us. The king's army would probably consist of at least twenty thousand archers and one thousand knights, each one of whom had toughened and proved himself in a lifetime of feuds and warfare. They were, too, from all accounts, almost a race of giants, six feet being considered an ordinary stature among them. On our side there were less than a thousand men, armed, it is true, with terrible weapons of destruction, but as yet unskilled in the art of using them.

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Then again, between us and our foes lay 400 miles of rough ice, frozen into one solid block by the frosts of centuries, and in all probability likely to remain unbroken to the end of the world. It would have been impossible, with what we had in view, to leave our ships and traverse it on foot, for we could not have taken our guns with us. It seemed equally impossible that we should find a passage round it. Most Arctic explorers had been obliged to leave their ships and take to sledges after they had reached a certain point. And we had as yet no reason to believe that we should be more fortunate, beyond the assurances of the Princess that she would lead our expedition to the North Pole.

But we had still something to learn in this respect, and the information was imparted to us at our second council of war, which consisted only of Sir Thule de Brie, Captain Thorlassen, the Princess and myself.

We were discussing our plan of action when we reached Asturnia, and arranging some methods of gun and rifle practice for the training of our crews. Captain Thorlassen offered but few suggestions, and then hazarded the remark that these plans were somewhat premature. That, for his part, he had entire confidence in the Princess Thora and Sir Thule de Brie, but it seemed to him that the most essential detail for discussion was how we were to get over the hundreds of miles of ice which lay between us and our destination. He would be glad to hear some suggestion on this point, as he could see no other way than an attempt to cruise along the open waters by the shore, when such an opportunity offered itself.

The Princess Thora smiled. "When I said I would lead you to Asturnia, Captain Thorlassen," she answered, "I did not speak idly, and though what I am going to tell you will meet with incredulity and perhaps contempt, I have no doubt in my own mind that what I say will be fulfilled by actual occurrences.

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"I have spoken to you of the Lord of Argenteuil. Dr. Silex has met this brave and wise man, and I think he will tell you that he was possessed of no ordinary powers and of no ordinary knowledge. He was, in fact, descended from the same Argenteuil who came to this country from the shores of Normandy, and who was then reputed to be the greatest seer and prophet of his century. I think I told you that among the few things we took away from this country was an ancient scroll, apparently of no value to people fleeing for their very lives, but which the Lord of Argenteuil carried on his own person till we reached the shores of England. This scroll, supposed to have been written by his famous ancestor, contained a prediction of the most important events that would occur in the history of our kingdom, and it is worth noting that most of these predictions have since been verified by the actual occurrences. The very last prophecy inscribed on this scroll is that in the month of July, in the year 1892, the kingdom of Asturnia would once again for a brief period be freed from the eternal barrier of ice that surrounded it. The scroll says nothing as to how this will be brought about, but since the Lord of Argenteuil expressly laid down that we should take shelter in this harbour, and close the entrance until the end of July, it is probable that he foresaw some great disturbance of nature, such as took place in the year 1105, when a path was made for our ancestors through a great barrier of ice 700 miles in width.

"And indeed that occurrence is an argument in favour of the truth of so strange a prophecy as the one in which I ask you to place your confidence. You may say that this piece of ancient history is a mere myth; but this solid fact remains, that by some way or other a people that still perpetuates, as I ascertained in England, the speech and customs of the old inhabitants of Normandy, exists to this day in the kingdom of Asturnia. What has happened

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once may occur again, and the mere fact that so many of the predictions have come true is in itself an argument in favour of this particular event taking place.

"There is, however, an anxious time before us. It is possible that we may be unable to avail ourselves of the opportunity afforded to us. It may be that the forces employed on our behalf will be so gigantic and untameable that we shall be overwhelmed with a terrible disaster. But in any case, I believe that before this summer is past, a clear sea will lie between us and the southern coast of my country."

Captain Thorlassen was a practical man, and I could see in his face that he would have preferred some more practical method of dealing with the question. I myself would have rather listened to some plan, the success of which would depend on our own exertions rather than on the intervention of nature. But we both concealed our doubts, and all four of us discussed the matter as though it had been an ascertained fact. The Princess, with a woman's quick intuition, guessed our disappointment, but she evidently so firmly believed in what she had told us that she thought it unnecessary to say anything more on the subject.

The next day we started our preparations for war, and in the course of a week all the rifles and guns were brought up from the holds, cleaned and set in thorough working order. We had among our crews more than fifty old naval gunners of experience, and a large number of men were well acquainted with the use of the modern rifle. We owed this to an act of foresight on Captain Thorlassen's part, for although he had been opposed to the shipment of these munitions of war, he had had the good sense and honesty to see that they would not be rendered absolutely useless to us for lack of skilled men to fire them. These gunners were appointed to posts of command, the rifles were handed out to the crews, and a cer-

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tain number of men were told off to learn the use of the guns.

For the next month the lonely world of ice and snow rang with the crack of rifles, the thunder of cannon and the bursting crash of shell. We were sparing with our ammunition, but recognised that a certain amount of it was well spent in procuring some efficiency in the use of the remainder. Sir Thule de Brie and the Princess watched the operations every day with the keenest interest. The fifteen pounders were a continual source of wonder and appreciation to the former, who was an earnest and skilled soldier. We hauled two of these up to the top of the cliff, and fired at marks set up on the ice hummocks far out across the sea, and as the shells threw up showers of glittering fragments into the sunlight, his face flushed with pleasure, and the light of battle came into his eyes. It was indeed a remarkable sight to a man who had never before seen the devastating effect of modern artillery.

"Do you think your armour will stand that?" I said one day, as a shell shattered a block of ice ten feet high into pieces no bigger than a cocoanut.

He smiled grimly. "The armour may stand it," he replied, "but God help the man inside the armour. The fight is as good as won."

So little did Sir Thule de Brie himself understand the magnitude of the task before us.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CATAclysm

ALL through June the thermometer had been rising daily, until at the end of the month it was above 60° Fahr. Captain Thorlassen told me that so high a temperature had never hitherto been recorded in this latitude; and he by no means regarded it with the same pleasure as the men, who absolutely revelled in the warmth and sunshine after so many months of the Arctic cold. He shook his head doubtfully, when I asked him what were the reasons for this unusual heat; and his reply was that it probably foretold some unusual disturbance in nature, and that possibly the prophecy of the first Lord of Argenteuil might not be so wild as it seemed. But he added that if the heat continued for two years, it would not melt the barrier of ice that lay between us and the North Pole.

And before the middle of the month there were other signs and portents which indicated that something extraordinary was going to happen. The whole sky glowed with a dull copper light. There were strange rumblings from time to time, and vibrations that rattled everything on the ship. The atmosphere, moreover, seemed highly charged with electricity. The compass was absolutely useless. Strange blue lights shot out from men's fingers as they touched anything made of steel, and their hair glowed with sparks as they brushed it. The heat was

The Cataclysm

almost unbearable, such as one experiences before a summer thunderstorm.

These strange occurrences grew more frequent from day to day, and the trembling of the earth became almost incessant. Captain Thorlassen ordered steam to be kept up in all the boilers and had the ships firmly anchored bow and stern. He said that he had seen signs like these before a tornado in the China Seas, and before the great volcanic eruption of 1882. He also allowed no one to leave the ships for more than an hour at a time.

The thermometer rose to nearly 70° by July 7th, and there was open water three miles from the shore. The heat was insufferable, and we walked about in our shirt sleeves.

On July 8th Captain Thorlassen and I were on shore taking observations from the top of the hill, when he pointed out to me a thin pillar of smoke streaming straight up into the still air from a mountain ten miles to the south of us. Even as we watched it, the pillar increased in size, and presently a flame shot up from the dark vapour.

"A volcano," he said, examining it carefully through the telescope. "We are going to have trouble, Dr. Sillex. Did you ever see any pictures of the Krakatoa eruption?" I admitted that I had.

"Well, it is going to be as bad as that, I expect, if not worse. The Princess is not far wrong in her prophecies. We are going to have trouble, Dr. Sillex."

The next day the column of smoke died away, but the vibrations of the earth became more severe and continuous. Small pieces of rock began to fall from the cliffs, and the surface of the water swayed gently to and fro like soup in a plate. Even the eternal ice began to shift and change. Huge fissures, several feet wide, crossed it in all directions; and looking over the edge of these we saw chasms sixty feet in depth with water splashing at the

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bottom of them. Huge hummocks came crashing down into heaps of fragments, and the shape of them changed day by day. A fine brown dust began to cover everything. I examined some of it under a microscope, and it seemed to be of volcanic origin. As the result, I suppose, of this dust we saw strange refractions in the atmosphere. An object six miles off was magnified and thrown out of all proportion. And once, reflected in the sky, I thought I could see the inverted towers and walls of some strange city.

On July 16th a thick vaporous haze overhung everything. It did not last long, for on the next day a faint breeze blew up from the north and cleared it away. I began to wish that something definite would happen. The suspense was telling terribly on our men, and the constantly increasing vibrations were enough to affect the strongest nerves.

On July 18th I and Captain Thorlassen went again to the top of the hill to take observations, and, if possible, find some explanation of these phenomena. Sir Thule de Brie and the Princess accompanied us, but all the rest of the men were, by express orders, on board their various vessels.

I think it was the hottest day we had as yet experienced. The thermometer was 73° Fahr. in the shade. The sky above was clear, but the blue was tinged with a curious pale orange colour. On the western and northern horizons lay a dark semicircle of black clouds, lined here and there with a lurid copper light. There was not a breath of wind, and the atmosphere was stifling and intolerable. I watched the flight of some gulls with interest. They were unusually active, and flew round our heads in short swift circles, uttering loud cries. There are no better harbingers of climatic disturbance than these birds, and I saw Captain Thorlassen's eyes fixed steadily on the west, as though he expected to see something.

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And, even as we looked, the sky above us began to darken, but not with clouds. The blue faded from it and changed into a pale yellow, and then into a light muddy brown. You have seen something similar, Cordeaux, in a London overhead fog. But this was perfectly clear, and we could see everything plainly for miles round, as though through a piece of yellow glass.

Then the earth began to tremble more violently under our feet, and a huge piece of the cliff, weighing several tons, fell into the water of our little harbour, and shot a tall pyramid of spray into the air. The Princess Thora seemed nervous and depressed, and I chatted cheerfully to her in the hope of raising her spirits. Captain Thorlassen still had the telescope to his eye, and was looking all round the horizon. Then, suddenly, the gulls ceased to scream, and I noticed for the first time a faint continuous moan, like the sound of a threshing machine in the distance.

Then a breath of hot wind suddenly struck our faces like the blast from an open furnace door. Captain Thorlassen looked back towards the little harbour, which was hidden from us, and I fancied I saw an expression of anxiety cross his rugged face, though a solid wall of rock five hundred feet in height and one thousand feet in thickness sheltered the vessels from the west. Then he again looked through his telescope at the now advancing wall of blackness.

"A storm?" I queried.

"Perhaps worse than a storm," he replied laconically. "We should be better off lower down the hill, but I want to see it."

"There is some shelter," I said, pointing to a low overhanging ridge of rock about a hundred yards off. "It will protect us from the west, and we shall have a good view in every other direction."

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He nodded approval, and we all moved towards it. The ledge was about eight feet high, and would shelter us from both rain and wind. We stood at the corner of it, where it sloped on to the level, so that we could look over the top towards the west, until we were obliged to seek its protection.

Scarcely had we reached the spot when, without a word of warning, a violent shock flung us flat on to our faces, and there was a deafening crash like the fall of a five-storied house about our ears.

When I had sufficiently recovered my senses to look up, I saw a column of dust and smoke, half a mile in height, and a mile away to the left of us. As it cleared away, I saw with horror that the whole of a huge cliff had broken away from a hill side, and had tumbled into a heap of fragments on the valley below. I also saw, and the sight almost paralysed me with fear, that on the very spot on which we had just been standing there was a fissure in the rock two feet in width and extending across the whole plateau. As I looked, it slowly widened, and several million tons of rock began to lean out towards the harbour where our ships lay. Not one of us spoke, but all our faces were white with terror. I could hear the shrieks and cries of the men on the ships, but, from where we stood, we could not see the vessels themselves. For two minutes we watched that widening crack in silence. I do not think the idea of any danger to ourselves entered our heads. We were fascinated and spell-bound, as though by the sight of some huge black serpent extending its dark length across the rock.

Inch by inch the crack opened out until it was over twelve feet across. Then it suddenly ceased to widen, but I could still hear the plunge and roar of the pieces of rock falling into the water beyond.

We rose to our feet, and the Princess burst into tears, turning her head away from us so that we should not see.

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But she only gave way for a moment, and controlling her feelings with an effort, smiled.

"That was a narrow shave," said Captain Thorlassen. "Ah! I was afraid they could not stand it," and he pointed to the slope by the far part of the harbour. The men had evidently taken to the boats and deserted their ships, for small bodies of them were scrambling up the sloping rock close to the entrance. We were cut off from them by twelve feet of chasm.

Then, before we could discuss what had happened, we saw such snow as was left on the distant hills towards the west caught up and tossed into the air like a white cloud, and at the same time it seemed to my straining eyes that the horizon suddenly lifted a little. Captain Thorlassen dropped his telescope, and seizing me and the Princess by the arm, almost hurled us on to the ground, and dropped flat on his face. "Lie down, De Brie," he called out; but the tall knight never stirred, and kept his eyes fixed on the west. Then, suddenly, there was a fearful roar and rattle, and I saw his steel cap go spinning a hundred yards into the air, and float away like a white speck into the distance. At the same time his head and shoulders bowed like a reed, and he stumbled to his feet and crawled up to us. Looking below, we saw the crowd of frightened men, though partly sheltered by the cliff, go flat like a field of corn before a gale. The storm had broken.

The noise was like the shriek of a thousand steam whistles. Stones and snow and pieces of ice whirled over our heads, and the whole earth seemed to vibrate. But before two minutes had elapsed, there arose a sound so terrible and so deafening that the noise of the wind seemed only like the pipe of a penny whistle. I cannot describe it to you, Cordeaux, but if a thousand railway trains had met in one grinding crash of collision, it could not have produced so awful a result. Captain Thorlassen gripped me by the arm and pointed northwards.

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Then, through the driving snow, I saw the solid ice bend upwards into a white and rugged hill a hundred feet in height, which stretched from the shore as far as the eye could see. This hill rolled on towards the east like a wave, and as it rose and fell, the ice roared and splintered into blocks and fragments, which were tossed one against the other like corks on the crest of a wave. Some of them were hurled clean into the air, and others driven into great heaps and pyramids that came crashing down again into the water in cataracts of foam. Most of the ice was sixty feet in thickness, but the volume of water shattered it, as a boy breaks a window with a stone.

The wave rolled steadily on until it passed out of sight in the east, and behind its path the whole sea, as far as the eye could reach, was one horrible seething cauldron of grinding ice and water churned into a thick white foam, tossing and heaving itself into waves fifty feet in height. And the shrieking tornado, blowing probably at a hundred and twenty miles an hour, hurled all its fury on this scene of confusion and drove ice and water before it like chaff from the threshing floor.

I turned away my eyes and tried to dig my fingers into the rock to save myself, for it seemed as though the end of all things was at hand. Five minutes later I looked up and realised what had occurred. The Palæocrystic sea was shattered into fragments. The ice of centuries was broken at last, and the prophecy of the Lord of Argenteuil had been fulfilled.

CHAPTER XV

"ASTURNIA! ASTURNIA!"

FOR three hours we remained in the shelter of the rock, while the cold wind and rain went whistling over our heads. Then the storm began to abate. The sky above changed to a bright blue, and the sunlight sparkled on the foam-crested waves. The air was clear and keen, and the thermometer must have dropped below freezing point. An open sea, still covered with large bergs and floes of ice, lay between the land and the North as far as the eye could reach.

Several times we had crept on our hands and knees to the edge of the chasm, and called out to our comrades. But there had been no reply, and it was impossible to get a glimpse of the harbour from that position. The split in the rock had lengthened and continued itself in a long arc, cutting us off from the rest of the land as completely as though we had been on an island. The chasm itself was now fourteen feet wide and so deep that its sides disappeared into the darkness.

Then at last, after a long and weary waiting, an answering call came back; and in a few minutes half a dozen white-faced and bedraggled men appeared on the other side of the abyss and gave a faint cheer of welcome as they saw us.

"The ships!" I cried hurriedly. "Are they safe?"

"Safe, thank God," answered Captain Bulmer, who was one of the party. "The ice barrier stood, but only by a

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miracle. Here you, Andrews and Johnson, run back, and get some planks."

The men disappeared, and Captain Bulmer, after having flung us across a flask of brandy, which put some life into our cold limbs, told us that we had been given up for lost when the men saw the cliff crack. He said that, as far as they could judge, we had been on that very spot. Captain Thorlassen asked him eagerly about the ships, and he told us that the first swell of the advancing wave had created a sort of back-wash which had driven several huge pieces of ice towards the creek, and piling them up against the berg we had already placed there, had more than doubled the strength of the barrier. Even then the rising water had poured into the creek, and one or two of the vessels had burst their moorings, but the rest of the steel cables had held out bravely, and very little damage had been done, as far as he could see at present.

In about half-an-hour the men arrived with two long planks, which they laid side by side to bridge the chasm; and when we had crossed these, we descended with some difficulty the slope below. When we came close to the harbour entrance we stopped in silent amazement, and I uttered a silent prayer of thankfulness for our escape.

It was impossible that one single berg could have stood the strain of that enormous flood of water. It had not been more than fifty feet above the level of the sea, and its irregular shape had left several gaps on each side of it. But now across the narrow channel, between the two great walls of cliff, the ice was piled up to a height of over a hundred feet, and the whole solid mass was jammed so tightly between the two sides, that it might have been a wall of masonry. We afterwards found that it was actually covered with pieces of black basalt it had scored off the face of the rock. Our fleet lay quietly in the harbour, and the men were already on board several of the vessels. We made all haste to join them,

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and in less than twenty minutes we were on board the *Aurora*. I changed my clothes, and sank into a chair worn out with excitement and fatigue. But that indefatigable man, Captain Thorlassen, allowed neither himself nor his men to rest; and before an hour had passed, I was roused by the sound of the dynamite blasting away the ice at the entrance to the harbour.

It took five hundred men with axes, and a thousand pounds of explosive, to clear away this obstacle to our progress; and though the work was carried on continuously by day and night, five days elapsed before we were enabled to steam through the narrow channel and set our faces once more towards the north.

The open waters lay before us as far as the eye could reach, and here and there a few masses of ice floated idly along like small white islands. Most of these pieces were low and flat, and had evidently formed a part of the Great Frozen Sea. The wind was favourable, having veered to the south-west, and we were able to save the coal which we had put on board before our departure. The thermometer was at freezing point, and the fresh, keen air filled our hearts with new life and hope. Nature had truly intervened on our behalf, and even if we did not reach the Pole, we had every possibility of proceeding further north than any previous expedition. There were, however, many things to consider with a grave mind. For we had embarked on a fresh undertaking, the outcome of which no man could foresee.

On July 27th we reached the eighty-seventh degree of latitude, and still open water stretched before us to the horizon. We were the first to penetrate that blank space entitled on the maps "Unknown Region," and were further north than any man had ever sailed before; or at any rate, any man who had lived during the period of modern Arctic exploration. Many had died in the attempt, or after having battled in vain with the ice, had been forced

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to beat a retreat as best they could. Here were we, Cordeaux, sailing along as comfortably as any man could wish, with plenty of provisions, light hearts in our bodies, and good stout ships beneath us. It seemed almost incredible; and, perhaps, if you ever read this narrative of mine, you will refuse to believe it.

We took soundings from day to day. At first we could not touch the bottom. Then, just before we passed the eighty-seventh parallel, we found four hundred fathoms of water beneath our hulls. But when we reached $87^{\circ} 15'$, we were astonished to find the lead strike bottom at sixty fathoms, and this depth decreased every hour, until at the eighty-eighth parallel we found no more than twenty fathoms. This rapid shallowing of the water seemed to indicate that we were approaching land, or at any rate that we were no longer in the open sea. We were also visited by several flocks of birds, which wheeled over our heads, and sat on the rigging. Most of these were gulls, but three or four species were unknown to me, and I saw one—a large black sort of partridge, with a red bill and red legs—which was obviously no sea bird at all.

The thermometer, too, began to ascend as the depth of the water decreased; and on the 28th of July it had reached 50° F. This was not so easily to be accounted for, as the near presence of land would hardly cause a rise in the temperature, and we certainly expected to encounter more severe cold as we proceeded further north.

On the 29th a dense fog came down on us, and the heat was so considerable that the atmosphere was like that of a Turkish bath. We took the temperature of the water and found it to be 70° F.

The wind had now dropped, and we steamed along slowly at about three knots an hour, not knowing what lay ahead of us, nor, indeed, being able to see more than

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twenty yards in front of our bows. Fog signals sounded constantly on all sides of us, for our ships were close together, and from time to time the shadow of masts came out of the mist and disappeared again.

We were unable to account for this warm stream of water. The Princess told us that her country was as warm at this time of year as any part of England, but she could not account for it. She had always regarded it as quite natural. But Captain Thorlassen and I surmised that it must be due to some interior volcanic heat.

During these few days on the Polar Ocean the Lady Thora gave me some account of her country, and we realised how it was that a nation of people were able to exist in the very centre of the Great Frozen Region. I will not deviate from my narrative, Cordeaux, to repeat all the information she placed before us, which was intended rather for our practical guidance in conducting her campaign, than to gratify our idle curiosity. She was, indeed, singularly reticent on the whole subject, and only told us that which she thought it necessary for us to know. The nature of the country and people will appear in the due course of my own personal experiences, and so extraordinary were all the circumstances that I would rather tell you what I saw with my own eyes than of what I was told through another's lips.

On August 1st we were still steaming through the belt of mist. At three o'clock in the afternoon, I was in the fore part of the vessel and was occupied with my thoughts, which I must confess to you were chiefly of the Lady Thora and the hopelessness of my love. The sun was still in the heavens, but was no more to look at than a round white cheese. Captain Thorlassen was at the bridge hailing one of the other ships, and his voice sounded dull and ghostly in the thick atmosphere. When he had finished speaking, the silence was almost oppres-

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sive. A few muffled footfalls, as the men went quietly about their business; a very faint ripple of water at the bows, and the slow throb of the engines, were the only sounds to break the silence; and these seemed to be swallowed up and muffled in this blanket of fog.

My meditations were broken by the sound of a woman's dress sweeping along the deck. It went slowly backwards and forwards, and each time as it passed me, my heart beat a little faster, and I gazed through the mist at the faint shadow which went by. Since we left Grant Land, I had studiously avoided the Princess, resolving to see as little of her as possible until I had proved myself more worthy to be in her service. I was no longer able to conceal my love, and I had no wish to earn either her pity or her contempt.

Then I saw her come slowly forward towards me. She was clad in a long white robe richly embroidered with silver, and caught in at the waist with a dull heavy belt of the same metal. In her fair hair was a thin, plain circlet of gold. I had never seen her look more queenly, and the idea struck me that she was dressed for some particular occasion. As she came up to me, I took my cap from my head and bowed gravely.

"Well, Dr. Silex," she said, "have you seen anything to interest you?"

"Only the fog and the sea, my lady," I replied, rather more coldly than was necessary. "And, indeed, I am beginning to think that we shall see little else."

"You do not believe me, then," she said haughtily. "You think I have romanced—perhaps think that I am mad." I flushed deeply, for I remembered what I had thought when I first saw her.

"God forbid," I said quickly and angrily. "But you have forgotten what we have witnessed. The whole of this region—perhaps the whole world—has experienced so great a convulsion of nature, that your island kingdom

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may now lie a hundred feet below the sea; or, perhaps, the ice has been piled all over it, a hundred feet in height."

"Impossible!" she cried; "you do not know the place; or you would not imagine such a thing. The cliffs round its shores are high, and would protect it from both ice and water."

"Yet in the earthquake of 1882," I replied, "whole islands sunk into the sea, and fresh ones rose from its depths. Two weeks ago we saw with our own eyes a mountain crumble into fragments."

"Enough, Dr. Silex," she said sternly; "God did not bring us so far for that."

I looked her straight in the eyes.

"Are you sure that it was God that brought us?" I inquired. I paused, and to my surprise she buried her face in her hands, and her whole body shook with emotion.

"Forgive me," I said humbly. "I did not mean to hurt you."

"You are right," she cried, proudly lifting up her head. "It was I who brought you, and whatever happens will be laid to my account."

"No, to our own; for we followed you of our own accord and gladly."

"I would have you turn back, if you will."

"No one would turn back now," I answered; "not even if you asked them."

"Then I would have you reach your North Pole, and realise the object of your mission, and sail before the ice closes in on you again."

"Our ambition," I replied, "is to do more than merely reach the North Pole. We wish to serve you to the best of our ability. I am only a poor bookworm, with no strength of arm, and little skill with weapons of any sort, but I somehow feel now as though to fight were the breath of my life. It will be rather amusing to see what a fool I shall make of myself."

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She laid her hand on my arm, and I trembled as though an electric shock had been passed through my body.

"I know your heart," she said simply, "you will be true as steel." Wherein she spoke idly, for if she had known what was in my heart she would never have laid her hand upon my arm. Human nature could not stand it. I took her fingers in mine and kissed them passionately. Courtiers may kiss the hands of their rulers, but not as I kissed hers. She withdrew them sharply, and my secret was no longer hid from her.

She moved a little away from me, and there was an awkward pause. Then suddenly we heard a bell booming through the fog, and a few seconds afterwards the sound of a trumpet and the clash of steel and voices of men shouting. We peered over the edge of the vessel, and saw a dim long shadow sweep across our bows, and heard the steady sweep of oars. Almost instinctively I seized the Princess by the arm and pulled her sharply down below the bulwarks. I was not a moment too soon; almost instantaneously there was a swift whistling through the air, and the sound of some missiles striking wood and iron, followed by one or two sharp cries of pain. Our guns and rifles were below, but I saw six short flashes of flame shot from the bridge, and knew that Captain Thorlassen had emptied his revolver into their midst. Then the ship, whatever it was, disappeared from sight, and we did not dare to follow it, for we did not know what vessels of our own we might crash into or what rocks lay ahead of us.

Captain Thorlassen gave the signal to all the vessels to anchor, and we heard it passed from one to the other through the fog, until it was lost in the distance. Three of our men had been wounded by arrows, and one died towards the evening. We buried him the next day, and the Princess herself laid some small withered bits of pink

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saxifrage upon his shroud, the only tribute she could pay to the first man who had died in her cause.

For three days we lay at anchor in latitude $89^{\circ} 25'$, and then steamed slowly forward at about four knots an hour, taking soundings every hundred yards.

Then, on the morning of August 5th, a faint breeze came from the south, and lifted the shroud of mist which had covered us for so many days. One by one the masts of our different ships appeared to right and left of us, and the sun burst through overhead as the vapour was rolled away towards the north. And there at last, two miles away from our bows, we saw land; and at the sight of it every man on every vessel cheered with all his heart and soul again and again. Hats were flung into the air, flags run up to the mast-heads, and the whole fleet seemed as though it were celebrating some national festivity, instead of being about to engage on a most perilous and uncertain enterprise.

The land before us seemed singularly desolate and uninviting. Black cliffs rose out of the water to the height of two hundred feet, extending as far as one could see to east and west. Their bases were heaped high with enormous blocks of ice, doubtless thrown there by the recent earthquake. Against this stern barrier the waves of the Polar Sea broke with fury and beat themselves into foam and showers of spray. We could see no signs of life on the shore, though we examined it through a telescope; and it seemed hardly possible that this was the fertile country that the Princess had spoken of with so much pride and affection. Far away to the east we caught sight of three white specks on the horizon. It was evident that they were ships and not icebergs, for they moved rapidly from us and finally disappeared.

But no one who looked on the faces of the Princess and Sir Thule de Brie could doubt that this was our destination. The former stood with eager eyes and parted lips,

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anxiously scanning that long strip of rock-bound coast as though she was trying to recognise something on the shores. The latter watched it with a stern look of affection, as if the memory of the wrongs he had suffered at its hands outbalanced his joy at seeing it again.

Then he suddenly laid his hand on the hilt of his sword and whipped it from the scabbard, so that the gleam of the sun on the steel flashed across our eyes like a bar of lightning.

"Asturnia!" he cried in a loud voice, waving the gigantic weapon above his head. "Asturnia!"

And we all took up the cry, until the whole sea and sky seemed to echo with the single word "Asturnia." But at the sound the Princess, who was standing close to me, suddenly buried her face in her hands, and I could see that she was weeping. But I did not then know whether she wept for present joy, or the remembrances of past sorrow, or the fear of evil to come.

CHAPTER XVI

A MESSAGE TO COUNT GUY OF MARMOREL.

FOLLOWING the directions given us by Sir Thule de Brie, we steamed slowly along the coast towards the east, keeping our distance from the shore, and with a man at every mast-head. Rifles and ammunition were served out, and a fifteen-pounder placed in position on each vessel, so that we were prepared for any emergency. We were now in latitude $89^{\circ} 40'$, and crossing a dozen degrees of longitude every half-hour.

Before we had gone ten miles, we saw some signs of life along the coast. Here and there a few rude huts clustered together on the edge of the cliffs, and with steps cut down the rock to the shore. Then a mass of short sturdy trees, in which we caught the gleam of steel. Then a castle with grey towers and turrets thronged with men-at-arms, and with a gay banner floating from the keep; and everywhere, men riding along the coast at break-neck speed, and ever going east.

Then we encountered a long rocky headland, jutting far out into the sea, and when we had rounded this, there burst upon our sight a small fair bay with sloping sands, almost entirely cut off from the sea by a long line of reef; and behind this a grey town with many towers and spires; and behind that again, on a great eminence of rock, the long dark outline of a huge fortalice. Through the telescope I could see the armorial bearings on the ensign that floated from the highest tower—Quarterly—first and

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fourth argent, a dexter hand gules, second and third or, a griffin sable.

I handed the glass to Sir Thule de Brie, and, as he looked, a torrent of curses burst from his lips; and he shook his huge fist in the direction of the castle.

"You know the device?" I asked.

"By God and our Lady, I do," he cried vehemently, "and before many days are past I will tear it from its staff. It is the pennant of Count Guy of Marmorel, and the castle is—mine."

"Yours?" I queried.

"Ay, mine; and I would rather that the meanest swine-herd in all Asturnia kept his filthy revels in its hall than that Count Guy of Marmorel had crossed its threshold. But we will blow him from his resting place in pieces, as I saw you shatter the ice in the land of snow."

"H'm," I said thoughtfully, "it is a sturdy-looking place, and it will take some time to capture it."

"It will have to be captured," he replied simply, "it is one of the two keys of this country. I do not care if not a single stone is left standing upon another, so long as Count Guy is driven from its shelter."

We anchored two miles out from the shore in ten fathoms of water. No ships of any kind were to be seen, but in the town we noticed the people running madly to and fro, and caught the gleam of the sun on bodies of horsemen filing through the narrow streets towards the castle. We instantly summoned a council of war, and before an hour had elapsed, the captain of every vessel was on board the *Aurora*, and we discussed some definite plan of action.

We decided to send a herald ashore to announce the arrival of the Princess, and to demand that she should be reinstated in her just and lawful position as Queen of the country; failing which, we should do our best to ensure the fulfilment of that happy event. This document was

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drawn up in English, and approved by all, and then translated into Norman French by the Princess herself.

The next step was to find someone to take it. There was, I must confess, no rush to fill the ancient and honourable post of herald. The captains were all brave men, but they had very vague ideas about the manners and customs of the Middle Ages, and their imagination conjured up certain pictures of horrible and unmentionable tortures depicted in accounts of Nero's dealings with the early Christians. Sir Thule de Brie at once volunteered, but the Princess would not allow him to go, knowing that Count Guy of Marmorel was his private and particular enemy. I, however, had no compunction in offering my services, having every confidence in the usages of ancient chivalry; and, since I was an absolute stranger, being in no fear of any act of private revenge. When I said I would go, the Princess opened her lips, as though to speak, but I looked her hard in the face, and she was silent. She remembered that I had yet to prove my loyalty and devotion, and that here was an opportunity ready to hand. After some discussion, my offer was accepted, and I had just begun to work out in my own mind a true heraldic coat suitable for the occasion.

But all my good intentions were nipped in the bud, for as we talked we heard the clang of steel coming down the hatchway; the door was thrown open by one of the sailors with a broad grin on his face; and a gloriously emblazoned figure stalked into the room, bowing his tall plume as he passed through the entrance. The armorial bearings embroidered on his silk tunic were the same as those which floated from the keep of the castle.

His eyes wandered round the room, until he encountered those of the Princess; then his face paled, and he started back as though he had seen a ghost of the dead. The Princess rose to her feet.

"Do not be afraid, Sir Herald," she said sweetly, in her

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own tongue. "Your office will be respected. Your message? And from whom?" For reply he handed her a scroll with trembling hands. She took it and unrolled it with a smile.

"Is it your pleasure, gentlemen," she said to us, "that I read you the message of Count Guy of Marmorel?"

We nodded assent, and then we all stared at the tall glittering figure before us, as though he had been some strange animal. He was a darker man than Sir Thule de Brie, and not quite so tall, but he had a remarkable air of assurance, under what must have been to him most trying circumstances.

"The following is the message of Sir Guy of Marmorel," said the Princess.

"'All welcome to the strangers who have come to our shores like strange birds from the south.'" Some of the men smiled, and Captain Thorlassen bit his lip, remembering the dead body of John Allerton. "'Count Guy of Marmorel, Lord of the Castle of Sancta Maria, and Lord Deputy of King Charles of Asturnia, would know by whom he is honoured, and would exchange courtesies with those who have deigned to visit him. The whole town opens its arms with gladness, and lifts up its voice with thanksgiving. This very night will pass in wine and feast and song, and we do most grievously desire your honoured presence.'" "

She stopped and looked round on us with a smile.

"Well, gentlemen," she said, handing the scroll back to the herald, who bowed low as he received it. "Shall this night pass in wine and feast and song, and shall we give our honoured presence where it is so much desired?"

The men laughed, and I saw the herald's face flush as he drew himself up to his full height. He did not understand the words, but a laugh is translatable all over the world.

Captain Thorlassen rose to his feet. "Our answer,

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lady," he said curtly, "has been written by yourself. May I ask that you send it to its destination by this man, if it is your pleasure." And he handed the scroll to her.

"It is my pleasure," she said. "Sir Herald, I would ask you to take this answer back to your master." Then she unrolled the piece of foolscap, and read as follows—this, of course, being a translation, and perhaps not so courteously expressed as in the ancient language of Normandy.

"Whereas it appears that the Lady Thora de Brie is by birth and inheritance the just and lawful Queen of the kingdom of Asturnia, we call upon Count Guy of Marmorel to hand the keys of the Castle of Sancta Maria, which he holds by virtue of an usurper's force of arms, to the lawful owner of the said castle, and to himself appear in the presence of the Queen, and ask such mercy as she may be graciously disposed to extend to him. We further call upon all loyal subjects of this realm to offer her welcome and honour on her return to her country, and swear their fealty to the Court of Sancta Maria, where she purposes to take up her residence until certain matters of state have been arranged. To the self-styled and self-appointed king of the country we have no message, save that we are prepared to enforce the wishes and commands of our sovereign lady in all matters."

She handed the scroll to the herald, who had listened to the words with a scornful smile on his face. He bowed, and casting his eye carelessly over the writing, as though to assure himself of the substance of the message, began to roll it up, looking slowly round at the rough faces of the captains. Then Sir Thule de Brie, who during all this had been in the shadow of the corner, came out into the light, and the two men looked each other squarely in the face.

"You?" stammered the herald. "Sir Thule de Brie? How many more dead have come to life?"

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"Ask rather, Sir Herald, how many that are living shall die. And tell your master, that if he respects my lady's wishes, she takes his life out of my hands; but that if he thwart them, neither castle, nor armour, nor armies shall keep him safe. I have lived for four years alone, starved and frozen in a wildness of ice, and I have only struggled to live that Count Guy of Marmorel may die."

The herald did not answer him, but turned to the Lady Thora.

"I take it, my lady," he said, "that this courtly and somewhat ambiguous document is, in effect, a declaration of war, seeing that no man with the blood of our race in his veins would be likely to comply with its demands."

"You are at liberty to read it as you will, Sir Herald," she replied, "I only ask that which is my own. Gentlemen, have you aught to add to this message?"

"Only this," cried Captain Bulmer, who had no proper sense of dignity of diplomatic language. "That if this Count Guy doesn't turn out of the place by to-morrow morning, we will blow him out of it by to-morrow night."

"Aye, aye," cried the others.

The Princess smiled, and then turning to the herald, said sweetly:

"My friends agree with all I have said, and desire an answer by noon to-morrow. We shall not require your presence any longer, Sir Herald."

The man stepped forward a pace, and his dark eye glittered coldly. "I will take upon myself to give you my master's answer," he said; "both to you, and to Sir Thule de Brie, and to these poor fellows who have risen like wreckage from the sea, and who know not the hopelessness of your cause. My answer is this." He drew his steel gauntlet from his left hand, and threw it ringing on the floor. Sir Thule de Brie sprang forward, and picking it up, handed it on his knees to the Princess Thora. She rose indignantly to her feet, imperious, with flashing

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eyes. We all rose, too, and more than one of us laid his hand on the knife at his belt.

"Sir Herald," she said sternly, "you exceed your authority. Your master knows naught of us as yet, and you were sent with a message of welcome. We will receive his answer, not yours, by noon to-morrow."

"I have my master's confidence," he replied, turning to leave the room, "and I can assure you, my lady, that the answer to-morrow will not be spoken with the lips."

"And our reply may speak louder than you think, Sir Herald," the Princess replied. "The audience is ended. Sir Thule de Brie, conduct the knight to his boat."

The glittering figure of embroidered silk and polished steel passed out of our sight through the cabin doors, and Sir Thule de Brie followed with his hand upon his sword.

Before three hours had passed we had our answer. It came in the form of a mass of rock, which went singing over our heads with incredible velocity, and buried itself in the sea, about a quarter of a mile beyond us.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SIEGE OF SANCTA MARIA.

IT was quite evident that the siege of Sancta Maria was to be no child's play. We were rather over two miles from the shore, and yet this huge mass of stone had been hurled at us with marvellous accuracy and force. The manufacture of mangonels had evidently improved since the days of William the Conqueror. We examined the castle carefully through telescopes, and saw a great engine of some sort perched upon the highest tower, and fifty men straining at a long lever. Then they suddenly stepped back, the lever whirled round like a wheel of mist, and another dark object flew towards us. We could distinguish its flight the whole distance, and saw it swing down on our main top like a thunderbolt, break the wood off short like the stem of a clay pipe, and tumble into the sea fifty yards away.

This was too near to be pleasant, and Captain Thorlassen gave orders to steam slowly out to sea, stopping every quarter of a mile to test the range of the enemy's fire. It was not until we were three miles out that the missiles began to fall short of us.

Then, secure from all interruption, we spoke an answer to the Count of Marmorel, and it chipped off a few feet of turret from his highest tower.

After that began such a bombardment as no inhabitant of Asturnia could have ever dreamed of, and many a stalwart man-at-arms must have thought that all the devils

The Siege of Sancta Maria

had been loosed from the depths of the sea. White puffs of smoke burst from the long line of ships, and the roar of the guns was almost continuous. Shells burst all over the castle, splintered stones flew in all directions, and the whole building was so crowned with smoke and flame that it seemed to be on fire. Then the proud ensign of Count Guy of Marmorel was blown clean off its broken staff and floated away on the breeze, and before five minutes had elapsed we saw the beams and wheels of the mangonel come crashing down the castle walls, and certain small objects that glittered in the sun were sent spinning in all directions. Two shells had burst simultaneously in the middle of the group of men who worked the machine, and the progress of modern science must have been forcibly brought home to them.

The signal to cease fire was given. We had taught the moral lesson which we thought it necessary for our enemies to learn, and had paved the way for an advance by destroying what appeared to be their chief engine of destruction. Further bombardment was merely a waste of ammunition, for the castle was too huge and solidly built for our fire to make any real impression on its walls. It was necessary for us to come to closer quarters.

Along the sea shore, and skirting the whole of the bay, ran a line of small towers connected by a continuous wall. This formed a complete fortification to the town on the seaward side, and was doubtless intended to protect it from roving bands of marauders and outlaws, a large number of whom, so the Princess informed me, had gathered themselves together in the northern fastnesses of the kingdom, and were occasionally bold enough to make raids on the coast. After due consideration, we resolved to occupy this line of forts, and make them a base from which to conduct our operations against the castle; and with that end in view we slowly steamed up to within a mile of the shore and lowered enough boats

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to land five hundred men. Every man was armed with a rifle and cutlass, and there was a Maxim in the bow of every boat, with a broad iron shield that covered the whole of the craft from any front attack.

We covered them with our guns and watched them row shorewards. When they were three hundred yards away from the sandy beach, we saw the air darken with a cloud of arrows, and heard the rattling reply of rifles and Maxims. We opened fire with our fifteen-pounders, and to our surprise the conflict did not last more than three minutes. The enemy evacuated the walls and towers and fled through the streets towards the castle, evidently preferring to make sure of a safe retreat while there was yet time. We threw one or two shells into the town wherever we saw the glint of steel, and our men ran their boats up on the sand, blew down the gate of the fortifications, and hoisted the English flag on the central tower.

Before eight o'clock that evening we had landed ten guns, an enormous quantity of provisions, and another three hundred men, and had secured our first footing in the land of Asturnia in a position which, with modern cannon and stout hearts to defend it, seemed absolutely impregnable.

A continuous passage, pierced with loopholes, ran through the whole length of the fortification, but it was divided into sections by strong oak doors heavily clamped with iron. The walls were five feet thick, and the floors strewn deeply with rushes. The traces of recent habitation lay about in every direction; earthenware jugs and iron pans, massive chairs and tables, and remains of recently cooked food. These long corridors had evidently been used as rooms by the common soldiers. Within the towers, which were three stories in height, there were signs of greater luxury, heavy silken tapestries, embroidered rugs and hangings, flasks of wine or some sort of liquor, and in one of them a small dog of the

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Pomeranian type, with a silver collar round his neck. These towers had probably been occupied by the officers of the guard.

We distributed our small force along the whole length of the wall, and, as we were now to be a military body, divided them into small sections of about forty men, each under the command of their own captain. Each section had a Maxim and a fifteen-pounder. Captain Thorlassen was in command; and Sir Thule de Brie, an ex-gunnery lieutenant and two ex-sergeants of marines, constituted his whole staff. His own military knowledge was not great, but he was a man who was well able to assimilate and make use of the knowledge of others.

Before twenty-four hours had elapsed we were comfortably settled in our new home. The guns were mounted on the towers, the provisions distributed, and the whole system of guards and military routine marked out. The place appeared absolutely impregnable, and it was a marvel to me why it had been evacuated. Not a single dead man was left within its walls; and, if any had been wounded, they must have been carried off by their comrades. I could only suppose that the defenders had underrated its importance to us, and had supposed that they could fight equally well from the castle. I wondered what Count Guy of Marmorel, reputed the finest soldier and strategist of the kingdom, would say to them when they arrived at the castle gate. I think we could have held the place a year against all the forces of Asturnia. But it was our intention to leave it at the earliest opportunity. It was only the thin end of the wedge—a resting place where we could form our plans, and a base from which we could conduct our operations.

Our plan of campaign was a simple one, and dictated by circumstances. A map of the castle, roughly drawn by Sir Thule de Brie, lay before us, and we studied it carefully. It was obviously useless to batter away at the castle

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walls, and quite impossible to storm them. It was also a waste of time to wait for the enemy to come into the open to be shot at, and if we were to adopt that Fabian policy, the two forces might have had to wait for a year, each crying defiance, but making no efforts to thrust it down the other's throat.

We resolved, therefore, to blow in the gates of the castle with dynamite, advance two guns to cover the great inner courtyard, and fight our way into the heart of the fortress. It was a plan in which the advantage would lie with an enemy trained and equipped for a hand-to-hand conflict, but it was the only likely one that suggested itself. Perhaps you will smile, Cordeaux, when you read of these simple arrangements, but you must remember that we had no trained strategist or commander in our ranks, and that our ideas were only those of men who are forced to fight without having been taught how to do so.

We rested ourselves for two days, for we had gone through much, and the task that lay before us demanded that the men should be absolutely fresh in body and spirits. Hour after hour I sat quietly on the top of one of the towers and examined the town through a telescope. The people and buildings were most interesting to me as an antiquarian. Here was a place where life had evidently stood still for nearly eight centuries. The inward development of the country had, so far as I could gather from Sir Thule de Brie, tended merely to more perfect methods of robbery and violence. The development from without had been, of necessity, nil. Here was the same architecture that one still finds in a few great buildings in Normandy, the same narrow streets and lack of sanitation that prevailed in the Middle Ages, the same customs, the same atmosphere of mental inactivity and physical strength that belonged to a time when a man's muscles were the charter by which he lived.

The great castle itself, grim and silent in the back-

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ground, was a symbol of sullen conservatism. A fresh and equally gorgeous flag floated from the keep, but there was no other sign of life on its walls. It watched us like a gigantic eagle perched on some lofty crag, never stirring, but with keen and open eyes.

Behind the castle lay the unknown kingdom of Asturnia, and somewhere, not more than twenty miles away, lay the goal of our ambitions. We were now in Lat. $89^{\circ} 40'$. The ground sloped so steeply from the shore that it was impossible to see any land beyond the curve of the bay and the sharp ascent on which the castle stood. We gathered, however, from various conversations with the Princess and Sir Thule de Brie, that the Pole itself was most probably in Avranches, the capital of the kingdom. If that were the case, it was still quite possible that none of us might ever set foot upon the spot.

It was now August 29th, and we already had several hours of darkness each day. Whatever was to be done would have to be done quickly. The thermometer, however, was no lower than 48° , and it was quite pleasant sitting in the sun. I concluded, which afterwards turned out to be the case, that this comparative warmth was due to some peculiar and internal heat below the crust of the earth's surface, and that the whole land was in fact the centre of intense volcanic activity.

On the night of August 31st we decided to make our first attempt to drive the enemy from their stronghold. In making our plans, we had received considerable assistance from the merchants and common people of the town, who were still at heart the enemies of their king, and who had already sent us a secret deputation under cover of darkness. We could not count on their open assistance in the attack, as they were too deeply saturated with fear of their over-lord, and too apprehensive of the consequences of defeat; but they gave us much valuable information as to the position of the enemy's outposts in the

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town, and there was little doubt that if things went at all in our favour, they would swarm out to fight with us and avenge themselves for five years of slavery and oppression. In one respect their sympathy was practical. We had decided that the success of this attack would depend more on the affair being carried out by stealth than by any open display of force; and they supplied us with five hundred costumes such as were worn by the ordinary mechanics in the city.

Arrayed in these garments, we sallied out after dark in parties of five and six, and strolled unconcernedly into the town. Two guns were unlimbered and packed on a rude sort of wagon in such a way as to suggest bales of merchandise. The ammunition and gun carriages were covered over and placed in a similar vehicle, and both were drawn by a line of men pulling on ropes. This rather peculiar sight would occasion no particular comment in the town, as the horses in this country are limited in number and exclusively owned by the knights and noblemen.

It was nearly midnight before the whole five hundred of us had passed out into the town. It was a dangerous enterprise, and would have been impossible if we had not been able to rely on the silence and passive assistance of the people. We agreed to meet at the north end of the town close to the gates of the castle, but not in such a way as to attract attention, remaining scattered in small groups in the neighbouring streets until the signal was given. Each man was armed with his rifle, muffled up to resemble a bundle of sticks or reeds, and at a preconcerted signal, the men on the forts had instructions to open a heavy shell fire on the east end of the castle to create a diversion in that quarter. We also detailed one hundred of our men to make a feint on the eastern gate from a safe distance. The main point of our attack was to be the Great West Gate.

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I, Sir Thule de Brie, Captain Thorlassen, and two other men made our way unobserved to a small alley which led into the open space round the castle. We narrowly escaped detection, for no sooner had we hid ourselves in the shadow of an archway, than we heard the clank of steel, and six tall soldiers filed past us and disappeared into the darkness. It was now after one o'clock, and the streets were deserted. It was scarcely possible that the guard could go far without encountering some of our men. Then there would be questions, and the whole affair would be ablaze.

Captain Thorlassen took a rocket from under his jerkin, and placing the stick in some soft earth between two stones, lit a match and applied it to the fuse. It spluttered for a few seconds; then there was a long hiss, and a white line of fire streamed up into the sky. For a minute there was silence; then we saw our searchlight strike the dark mass of the castle into a white picture of illuminated wall and tower. Almost simultaneously there was a clash of steel close by, cries, and the reports of rifles. Then from the forts came the roar of guns, the singing of shells, and the yellow spurts of flame as they burst over the fortress. Then from the east we heard the long continuous rattle of rifles, spurting lead aimlessly at a stone wall. Yet on our side there was still silence, save for those few shots, and only the soft creeping of many feet, and the gathering of men in the shadows, and the whispered commands, as the guns were swiftly mounted and moved into position by a hundred eager hands.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TRAP

AS we made our way into the square to join the others, we came upon an outpost of the Royal Guard. They were lying dead on the pavement, their faces shattered with bullets, and four of our own brave fellows were lying in a pool of blood by their side, one with his body literally cut into two pieces.

I myself had obtained permission to be one of the three men told off to place the charge of dynamite against the Western Gate, and to fire the fuse. It was not a very glorious post of honour, as the danger was slight, but I was as yet young in war and the individual act appealed to me.

We crept forward across the square without much fear of being observed, for the men on the ship were using the searchlight skilfully, and the western end of the castle was left in utter darkness. Our soft leather shoes made no sound on the smooth rock. A single yellow torch flared high up on one of the flanking towers, but its light was lost in the blackness before it reached the earth. Our elementary ruse had apparently been successful. We could hear the roar of battle on the eastern side—the rattle of rifles, and the cries of men. But here the walls seemed to be deserted. No light came from the loopholes and no arrows were sent out to search the darkness. And yet those few shots, which had silenced the Royal Guard, could hardly have gone unnoticed. Count Guy of Marmorel was no novice in the art of war.

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We reached the castle wall without mishap, and felt cautiously along it until we came to the Great Gate. Then we sank on our knees and arranged fifty pounds of dynamite to the best advantage. Not a word was spoken, and we worked so silently that a man with his ear against the oaken doors could not have heard a sound louder than the nibbling of a rat.

Then came the only perilous part of our enterprise. A match had to be struck, and a match gives light, and a hundred arrows sent in the direction of a light are likely to strike at least one of three men who are near it. We had not remembered to bring our electrical firing apparatus with us, and it was now too late to repair the error. Taking my matchbox from my pocket, I carefully struck a wax vesta, and, sheltering it with my hands, applied the flame to the fuse. It was agreed that the others should run directly this was done, and my companions were ten yards across the square before I could blow the match out and stumble to my feet. Then to my horror I felt a hand catch hold of my coat collar and draw me back tight against the gates. I was almost choked, but I hardly thought of that, for the fuse was spluttering away at my side, and it was only timed for one minute. I writhed my head around for an instant and saw a light streaming from a small barred hole, and against the light a bearded face and black hairy arm. Then there was the sound of some steel weapon being loosened in its sheath, and, quick as thought, I reached under my jerkin, whipped out my revolver, and discharged its five chambers over my shoulder through the grating. There was a groan; the grip relaxed on my collar; and, stumbling forward, I struggled to my feet and flew for my life across the square, with the singing of arrows about my ears and the ring of their steel on the rock beneath my feet. I heard cries of pain from my comrades, and knew that some of the random shots had found their mark.

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Then there was a fearful roar, and a shock that threw me to my feet, and for a moment the whole darkness seemed to burst into flame. At the same moment the searchlight, concerning the use of which minute and distinct orders had been previously given, fell on the western face of the castle, and revealed a blackened and smoky gap in the face of the stone, and a great pit hollowed out from the rock, and beyond a large courtyard, illuminated with half-a-dozen small torches, but absolutely empty.

Our men raised a cheer, and gripped their rifles more firmly in their hands. The two guns were trained on the shattered gateway, and then for a few seconds there was absolute silence—the silence of expectation. Then like a storm of hail came the arrows, whizzing over our heads, striking the stones beside us, burying themselves in men's limbs and bodies, and hissing past us into the darkness beyond. In reply, we fired wildly at the castle walls, and deluged the courtyard with spitting bullets and bursting shells. But the superiority of modern weapons was useless against men securely entrenched in that mountain of stone. The order to advance was shrieked out above the din. I know not to this day who gave it. Perhaps Thorlassen, perhaps De Brie, perhaps one of the sailors. It was an act of madness, but no one questioned it; for it was impossible to stand our ground, and the men were as furious as chained beasts to get at their adversaries. The noise of the guns ceased, and through the white smoke, glittering in the searchlight like clouds about the moon, the men dashed forward across the square with wild cheers and cries of rage. Only the gunners—some twenty in number—stood firm to their posts, ready to assist us when their time came, if any of them were left alive to do so.

We reached the gateway, scrambled over the great pit which the dynamite had hollowed out beneath it, and poured into the courtyard. No man skilled in the art of

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war would ever have allowed his followers to run their heads into what could easily prove a veritable death-trap. The whole place was in almost complete darkness. The searchlight was of no use to us, and the torches had either been put out by our shell fire or else purposely extinguished by the defenders.

Then someone struck a match and lit a piece of magnesium wire, and we saw plainly in what manner of place we were. The courtyard was about two hundred feet square and entirely surrounded by walls at least sixty feet in height, and only pierced by narrow loopholes. A single door, made apparently of iron, gave entrance to the rest of the castle. It was a fortress within a fortress.

The momentary light flared out, and at the same time there was the thud and crash of some enormous weight falling to earth a few yards away from me, and the shrieks and groans of some of our men. Then a great hand gripped me by the arm, and I heard Thorlassen's voice in my ear.

"For God's sake, Silex," he cried, "help me to get the men out of this, or not one of them will be alive in five minutes."

They had begun to fire aimlessly through the darkness at an elevation which precluded the possibility of hitting either friend or foe, and the only reply was the occasional hiss of an arrow and a low groan as it found its mark. They were as brave as lions, these hardy sailors, but helpless in a place like this. Count Guy of Marmorel could have killed us all. I wondered why only a few single arrows came dropping in among us. It was like a cat playing with a mouse.

We dashed frantically among the men, yelling out the orders to retire, and hustling them towards the gate.

They were not unwilling to obey. The messengers of death, that came dropping among them one by one, had exercised a sobering influence on their rage, and with one

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accord they began to move towards the entrance, shouting and cursing in half-a-dozen different languages. Then suddenly a pyramid of fire shot up from the walls and illuminated the whole scene. The black crowd of men jostled each other more eagerly, some turning round and firing at the light behind them, others dragging themselves painfully along, others staggering with burdens on their shoulders—the bodies of their comrades, wounded or dead. It was an anxious moment. I saw the glitter of steel on the surrounding walls and heard the hoarse shouts of our enemies echoed from tower to tower. Then the iron doors swung back, and from the entrance poured a crowd of gigantic men. I could see their armour glittering in the light of the bonfire, and their long swords seemed like streaks of flame.

It was no time now to fly in disorder. Captain Thorlassen and Sir Thule de Brie stopped and hastily gathered twenty men around them to cover the retreat.

"Back to the guns!" Thorlassen cried in a voice of thunder to the retreating crowd. "We will keep them off. Back quickly, you dogs, and don't mind us if we're rushed and you have to fire."

We fired a volley into the advancing line of knights and retreated with the others, but with our faces towards the foe, until we reached the shelter of the archway. There we flung ourselves behind the fallen masonry and shattered woodwork. The enemy were not ten yards away. If they once reached us, rifles would have been no more use than the clubs of a savage. Twenty shots rang out simultaneously, and the mass of steel and waving plumes staggered and broke, but so close were they to us that one huge fellow came toppling and crashing into our midst, and, before we could make an end of him, he had twisted a man's neck as one wrings the neck of a chicken.

The advance was checked, but only for a moment. They came on again, and again we fired, but this time it seemed

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as though nothing could check them. The dead crashed to the ground, but living men leapt over their bodies, and they swept upon us like a wave of steel. Rifles were cut clean in half and sent spinning from men's hands. Men themselves were flung about and dashed to the ground, as rats are shaken by a terrier, and for a moment it seemed as though not one of us would leave that gateway alive. We were emptying our revolvers as fast as we could into grim helmeted faces, but in a hand-to-hand combat we were as children. The great swords rose and fell upon us unceasingly, and as soon as one shattered face sank to the ground, another rose behind it. It was useless to fight. We turned and fled into the square, six of us, Captain Thorlassen, four sailors, and I, and the searchlight that fell upon our faces was as welcome as the sun after an Arctic night.

Half way across the square we stopped, for no one followed, and there was still the sound of fighting at the gate, and the clash of steel against steel.

"Sir Thule de Brie," Thorlassen whispered hoarsely. "He is keeping them off. We must go back."

It was indeed Sir Thule de Brie, the only man among us able to meet these warriors hand to hand on equal terms. We saw his broad back as he was slowly forced out of the entrance into the square. We saw the rise and fall of his sword like a bar of light, and whenever he struck, a man fell. He was their master for a moment, but it could not last for long against such odds. Once he had to drop his sword, catch his assailant by the throat, and hurl him back among his comrades like a stone flung from a mangonel. And every moment he retreated a yard. He could easily have turned and fled, but I suppose something in his blood forbade the thought of flight. And so he fought and fought, with such fury that no strength could sustain it for long.

"Quick," cried Captain Thorlassen, "we must save

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him," and turning round, he ran across the square to the guns. I followed him, wondering what he had in his mind, and knowing that the guns were useless, except to kill the man who had saved us.

He rushed back to the gunners, spoke a few words, and a dozen men fumbled in a large grey box. Then he handed me a small black thing the size of a cricket ball, and putting another in his pocket, dashed back across the square.

Sir Thule de Brie was still facing his enemies, but his blows were less frequent and less vigorous. The plumes were shorn off his helmet, and I could see the dark stain of blood upon his armour.

"Throw when I do," Thorlassen cried, "and hard. I think we can settle them."

We reached De Brie's side, and whispered in his ear. Then suddenly we all three turned and fled. Our enemies were taken by surprise, and we were ten yards from them before they started to pursue. But they were too late. We turned and flung our message to them, hard and straight, catching two of them in the centre of their corselets. There were two loud reports, two sharp flashes of light, and the whole mass reeled back and began to totter like ninepins to the ground.

The dynamite bombs had done good work, and before the survivors had recovered their senses, all three of us were behind the guns, and the shells began to sweep the remnant of our foes from the square, as an October wind scatters the leaves across an empty street.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CIRCLE OF STEEL

OUT of the two hundred men who had flung themselves through the gates of Sancta Maria, fifty were dead, and over eighty had been disabled. The gigantic Sir Thule de Brie was streaming with blood from a dozen cuts, but so deftly had he defended himself that not one of them was of a serious nature, and he only asked an hour's rest and a few bandages. Captain Thorlassen and myself had escaped with a few scratches, more by good fortune than by any skill of our own.

We held a brief council of war, and opinions were divided as to the best course to adopt. Most of the captains and a large number of the men advocated a speedy return to the forts before the day broke. We should then, they said, have time to recruit our strength for a fresh attack, and enjoy absolute security. But Captain Thorlassen was firm in refusing to desert the position he had gained. He pointed out that we virtually commanded the shattered entrance of the castle with our guns; and that if we returned to the forts we might never have another chance of regaining that position. It was true, he said, that we had made a great mistake in attempting to storm the castle, and also in neglecting to entrench ourselves before commencing the attack. That, however, could be remedied at once. We could fight from the houses opposite the gate, and a house was as good protection from arrows as any castle that was ever built.

Sir Thule de Brie and I backed him up in this opinion,

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and after a few minutes' heated discussion we carried the day. A dozen men were at once despatched to the forts to bear the news of what had occurred and to bring back reinforcements of two hundred men, two more guns, and as much ammunition and provisions as could be got together in an hour.

The rest of us turned our attention to the houses facing the castle gate. Fortune had favoured us in this matter, for fifty yards behind our guns, and commanding every inch of the square, there was a large stone house, in itself almost a fortress. It belonged, so Sir Thule de Brie told us, to the Governor or Mayor of the town, who, in the stormy times which appeared to generally prevail in Sancta Maria, was glad to be near the shelter of the castle walls. A few thunderings at the heavy gate gained us admission. The occupants had watched the castle gate go flying and had learned their lesson. A hundred hands dragged the guns inside the courtyard, and with profuse apologies to the owner and his household, we set to work to adapt the place to our own requirements.

The numerous narrow windows were sufficient loopholes for at least two hundred rifles, and it did not take long to knock out four port-holes for the guns on the ground floor. We constructed them so as to command the castle and the square, for the other three sides of the house faced narrow streets where artillery would have been useless. The house itself was built in the form of a square around a courtyard, and had no entrance except that which faced the castle. We could not have found a better place for our purpose. It looked as though with sufficient provisions and ammunition we could hold our own against twenty times our number.

While half of our men were engaged in fortifying this place, the remainder went out on a foraging expedition, and completely cleared four or five hundred of the neighbouring houses of their stores of provisions. This un-

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pleasant work was carried out firmly but decently by the men. Receipts were given for everything taken, and though the inhabitants understood not a word of what was written on the pieces of paper, I think they recognised that some payment would be made.

In less than two hours the place was thoroughly fortified, and we had sufficient food, apart from what would be brought us from the forts, to last for a fortnight. An hour afterwards we heard the tramp of feet, and the heavy roll of wheels, and then a burst of cheers outside the gates. We opened them, and our comrades streamed in, hauling in the guns and Maxims, and dragging great waggons after them laden with food. When the gates were shut, the new-comers mounted guard, and we turned in for a few hours' rest. It was now after four o'clock, and there was a faint greyness in the sky, but the thought of day-break kept none of us from sleep, and it was after noon-day when we awoke.

It was a day of rest for us. Our loaded guns were trained on the gateway, but nothing moved or stirred within the castle, and the fluttering banner of Count Guy of Marmorel was the only sign of life upon the towers. We took the opportunity to bury our dead. Two hundred yards behind our house, and towering above the other dwellings like some huge mountain of stone, rose the spires and towers of the great cathedral and monastery of Sancta Maria, for the Catholic religion still held its ancient sway over the hearts of the men of this country, and among all the turbulence and tumult of this unhappy land men still found time to pray. By the permission of the Father Abbot, Bishop of this place, we laid our fallen comrades to rest under the shelter of this citadel of God, and fired three volleys over their graves. The Bishop himself conducted the service, having ascertained that our religion was a branch of the true faith; and the singers of his choir chanted strange but solemn melodies as the

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bodies were lowered into the ground. We met with no interruption from the castle, and were half ashamed that we had come to the burying-ground two hundred in number and armed to the teeth, and that lurking round the corner of the graveyard was the grim muzzle of a Maxim. It was a sad and impressive scene, and as I watched it, I wondered how many of us would leave our bones in this remote land. We were less than a thousand men in the midst of a hostile nation; hemmed in by the everlasting ice, and cut off from all possibility of retreat or succour. It would be a fight to the death, and the most sanguine man could scarcely dare to hope that he would come out from the contest alive.

Evening came, and still the enemy made no stir. We fired an occasional shell into the courtyard just to let them know that we held them in mind, but there was no reply.

I took my turn with the guard that night, and from the roof of the southern wall watched the waves of the searchlight pass over the sleeping city and the grim castle. My two companions, one a smooth-faced boy of about seventeen, and the other the scarred and grizzled captain of a Norwegian whaler, leant wearily on their rifles, and stared across the sea to where the lights of our ships twinkled in the darkness. They did not speak, and were probably thinking of home.

Then suddenly a small tongue of fire flickered on the highest tower of the castle, and as the searchlight played on it, I saw a thick column of smoke mount steadily into the sky. A minute or two afterwards the flames increased and burst through the smoke, and a clear blaze illuminated the square with a ruddy glow. I had no doubt that it was a signal, but to someone that we knew nothing of. The men who watched by the guns saw it too, and I heard the order to fire. One shell after another burst against the tower, and before five minutes had elapsed the

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blazing embers were scattered out in a circle like some great firework, and then there was darkness.

"What do you make of that?" I asked my companions, as I watched the sparks fly out and die in the night. The old man did not turn or answer. His head was bowed on his hands, and I think he was asleep. The youth sauntered over to my side.

"The king's army is marching on Sancta Maria," he replied in a low tone, "and we shall have to fight our way back to the forts through twenty thousand men."

I started as I heard the voice, for I thought I recognised it. The youth's face was in the shade, and I could not distinguish his features. His back had been turned to me the whole night, and I had paid no particular attention to him, being occupied with other matters of more importance.

I grasped his arm, and turning his face to the white glare of the searchlight, looked him squarely in the eyes. They dropped before my gaze, and I stepped back with a cry of amazement and horror. It was the Princess Thora.

"You here," I gasped; "what madness! what folly! Who allowed you to——"

"Allowed!" she replied, drawing herself up with dignity; "allowed, Dr. Silex?"

"Persuaded, I should have said," I replied sharply. "I beg your pardon, Lady Thora, this is no place for nicety in words, and this is no place for you."

"It is my place to share the dangers of those who risk their lives for me, and it is sufficient that I have come. No one but Captain Johansen knows, and he sleeps."

A strange thrill of joy ran through my heart, though I trembled to think of what might come. At last I had the opportunity of protecting the woman I loved. Perchance—who knows?—I might have the saving of her life put into my hands. I looked at her with fierce passion,

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and I felt as though she could see my eyes burn through the darkness. Then I clasped one of her little hands in mine, and dropping on one knee raised it to my lips. My soul was in a tumult, and thoughts of love were seething in my brain, coming too thick and fast for my tongue to find them words.

She withdrew her hand sharply from mine, and raised it to her ear, as though listening for something. I moved nearer to her, and opened my lips to speak that which was in my heart.

"Hush," she said. "Listen. Do you hear it?"

I listened, and through the silence of the night came the faint sound of clanking steel and tramping feet, like the dull continuous murmur of an advancing storm. We looked towards the north, and far away beyond the roofs of the houses, caught the glimpse of a thousand specks of light moving like fireflies in the darkness.

"The king," she cried. "King Charles the Red! He is marching from Avranches."

I did not answer, but I cursed the king deeply in my heart, for I had that on my lips of more importance to me than many kingdoms, and it might chance that the words would never be spoken now. However, it was no time for love. Even as I hesitated the sound grew louder, and the long trail of lights crawled nearer and nearer to the town. I raised my voice and gave the alarm. Old Johansen sprang to his feet and dropped the butt of his rifle on the stone floor with a loud clang. In less than five minutes the whole building resounded with words of command and the hurrying to and fro of feet. Some cried out for an instant retreat, but their comrades laughed at them.

"My secret is safe with you?" the Princess whispered, as we descended to the courtyard.

"On one condition," I replied.

"Condition?" she queried sharply. "How do you mean?"

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"You must allow me to keep by your side; I can then help you to conceal your identity, if any question it."

She consented, but gave me a look which told me plainly that she read what was in my mind, and indeed I was anxious to protect her from more than mere curiosity.

We watched the approach of the king's army in silence. Our guns were useless to check their advance, and we were wise enough not to waste our rifle ammunition. In less than a quarter of an hour the tramp of feet seemed to pass round us some distance away, and then it ceased altogether. Half an hour afterwards the dawn rose swiftly into the heavens, and the whole land was flooded with light.

Then, looking from the roof of the house, we saw that an iron ring had been set about us, and the rising sun fell on line after line of waving pennon and glittering steel, forming a complete circle round the square and the castle of about a mile in diameter. It was a magnificent sight for a parade ground, but I think more than one of us looked at the ships in the bay with wistful eyes and wondered if we should ever set foot upon their decks again.

CHAPTER XX

THE CARNAGE

IT looked as though we were caught like rats in a trap, but Captain Thorlassen came to my side and pointed towards the forts with a smile. The circle of steel was less than half a mile from their walls.

"There is the weak spot in the chain," he said. "They won't stay there long, if I know Captain Edwards. A retreat will be left open to us if we want it. And, by God, there will be some dead before to-night."

Even as he spoke, four white clouds floated from the forts, and we saw four long gaps in the ring of steel. Then the whole line of battlements began to belch forth smoke and flame, and the wind, which blew from the sea, carried a thick white haze between us and the contest. When it had cleared away and the firing had ceased, I saw no trace of waving pennon or gay armour between us and our comrades.

"I thought so," said Captain Thorlassen, "it is our turn now. Here, young fellow," turning to the Princess, who stood behind me, "go down to Captain McCaul and tell him to widen the embrasures so as to sweep 45° to right and left. Then tell him to open fire on both sides of the castle, but carefully. We shall want all our ammunition before to-night." She went off, only too glad to be out of his sight, and he turned to me.

"Who is that lad, Dr. Silex? I seem to know his face."

"He's on the *Skylark*," I replied, looking out at the forts, as though the matter did not interest me. "Captain

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Bulmer told him off to do a job for me one day, and he's rather taken a fancy to me."

"H'm, he looks a weakling. But lots of those poor-looking chaps have grit. By Gad, Dr. Silex, we shall all of us need grit to-day."

"Nothing can stand up against our guns," I replied.

"Niggers have rushed guns before now," he said, "and these are no niggers, Dr. Silex, but better men than you or I."

"We shall see," I replied laconically; "strength is not everything."

We watched the movements of the troops around us. Then there was the boom of guns beneath our feet, and the masonry quivered. Our work had begun. We watched the shells burst to right and left of the castle, and they did their work excellently. And a few minutes afterwards we saw the long circle of steel begin to close in upon us. As they advanced we spat out our shells upon them at the rate of four a minute, every shot carefully aimed at the thickest parts of the line so as to deal the greatest destruction possible. But though we tore long and terrible gaps in the circle, we could not check its advance. The northern part of it was apparently advancing without hindrance through the streets of the town. We could see nothing but an occasional banner, and it was useless to waste ammunition with so small a hope of hitting anything. Our whole attention was centred on the other three points of the compass, which lay within the range of our guns on the south wall, though one hundred and fifty of our number lined the other sides of the house, and were ready to do their best when the time came.

As the advancing army drew nearer to us, we could hear the hoarse cries of command, the groans of the wounded, and the continual clash of steel. Our rifles now opened fire, and swept the whole circle from left to right like the

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stroke of a scythe. But the waves of steel rolled on, still nearer and nearer, though we beat them into bloody foam with our shells and bullets. When we could almost see the faces of our enemies, Captain Thorlassen gave the order to cease firing. It was evident, even to me, the most unwarlike of men, that they intended to rush us, and that they so outnumbered our little garrison that we should have to literally blow them back from the walls of our fortress, or else be overwhelmed. We had to reserve our ammunition until the real contest began—a fight not for the mere honour of the victory, but for our very lives.

The ring closed in upon us until it swept along the castle walls, fifty men deep in close formation. In the front a forest of spears, behind these dense masses of bowmen, and behind these again a triple line of knights and nobles, gay with armorial bearings and golden device. Captain Thorlassen watched them with a grim smile. The advance had stopped, and for a minute there was almost complete silence.

Then the air was darkened, and the arrows came rattling against the walls like hailstones. And a few seconds afterwards huge masses of rock and iron beat against the masonry and shivered part of the parapet into fragments. They were working their mangonels from the castle walls, but they seemed unable to pitch their missiles at proper elevation, for none of them fell into our courtyard.

Under cover of this fire, a thousand men detached themselves from the ranks and ran swiftly towards us across the open courtyard, some bearing ladders and some huge shields of metal, and every man of them armed with a long handled axe. Simultaneously, the whole building shook with the roar of our guns, and the rattle of our rifles, and for five minutes we could see nothing but figures leaping out of a dense pall of smoke towards us, then tumbling in heaps against the very walls. It was like hell let loose—the continuous roar of artillery and rifle, the

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cries and shrieks of pain, the bodies of men writhing in a thick sulphurous haze. It seemed impossible that anyone could live within our zone of fire. But they came at us again and again, and the king was evidently determined to pour out the lives of his humbler subjects like water. There was the thunder of axes at our gates, and several ladders were planted against the walls, and hurled back again to the ground. Two or three men set foot upon the parapets and make good use of their weapons before they fell riddled with bullets. One, indeed, jumped down into the courtyard itself, shattered the skulls of two men, and would have annihilated the Princess herself with one blow of his axe, if I had not emptied my revolver in his face.

Then we heard the rifles ring out all round the building, and we knew that the worst part of the battle had begun. There were no guns to beat off an attack on the other three sides, but we mounted a Maxim to command two of the streets, and our men fought like heroes till their rifles grew hot in their hands.

Captain Thorlassen came up to me, his face black with smoke, and his left hand bleeding.

"We can't keep this up, Dr. Sillex," he said hurriedly, "the ammunition will run out. It will be a hand-to-hand fight before long, and then, God help us. Thank heaven, the Princess is safe. Here, you young skulker," he cried, catching sight of the Lady Thora, who was doing nothing in particular, "get to the north side and let fly as well as you know how. You'll get your head broken in by an axe in five minutes, so you may as well make some show of being a man."

The Princess turned round and looked him in the face with a faint smile, and I saw his cheek whiten. I whispered quickly in his ear.

"My lady," he stammered, and then, "Oh, my God—it is too awful. But we will stick by you to the end, and they won't touch you, if you let them know who you are."

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"Thank you, Captain Thorlassen," she replied with quiet dignity, "I would rather die with you than fall into their hands. And I would gladly go to the north wall if I felt sure I should be of any use. But please don't waste time on me, either of you. I can look after myself."

"You stay with her, Dr. Silex," said Thorlassen; "put her into shelter. I will come back; but my hands are full just now."

I placed her inside the building and returned to the courtyard. A minute or two later the guns ceased firing, and we only heard the crack of rifles and the clash of steel. By degrees the smoke cleared away, and as we looked out on the square an awful scene of death lay before our eyes. A man could hardly have walked across the ground to the castle without stepping on a dead body. In places they lay in heaps five or six deep, and men-at-arms, archers, and here and there a knight and his horse were mangled together in one broken and bloody mass. The battle had now shifted round to the other side of the building, and on this side nothing stirred save the limb of a wounded man, or the wing of some bird of prey. A faint steam rose from the ground as the sun beat upon it, and some distance off we saw the glint of steel still circling us round. We had yet to meet the knights of Asturnia. Only a few of them lay dead in the square, and they were evidently not anxious to prove their chivalry by tilting against a Maxim.

The ships and the line of forts were still firing at the enemy, wherever a sufficient body of them came within range, and I was glad to notice that there was a clear path between us and the sea. It was time for us to retreat, for no reinforcements could save us, and it was necessary to conduct the Princess out of danger at any cost.

The battle was raging furiously now against the north wall, and both our Maxims were sweeping the streets to

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right and left. The guns on the other side were silent and useless. We learnt from the gunners that they had just twenty rounds left for each gun. Captain Thorlassen had ordered these to be kept for an emergency.

I left the Princess in the care of some of the gunners, and sought out Captain Thorlassen. I found him on the north wall with Sir Thule de Brie. They both looked grave, and were anxiously scanning the town between us and the forts.

"We must go back," I cried, breaking in upon them; "this is useless, and there is a way open for us. The Princess is here, and she must be got away at once."

"Yes," answered Captain Thorlassen, "and in ten minutes it will be too late. We cannot hold this wall any longer. The enemy won't require scaling ladders. Their dead reach nearly to the parapet." And he did not speak idly. The Maxims must have piled up nearly two thousand men in that narrow street, and still the stream of spears and axes poured out in waves against the wall.

"It must be now," said Sir Thule de Brie.

Captain Thorlassen turned to the grimy and bleeding men who stood near him.

"Who will stay here with me?" he cried at the top of his voice; "the rest must retreat to the forts, and we must cover the retreat. I may as well tell you, boys, that there is a good chance of our not getting back. I want a dozen of you."

Ten dozen hands went into the air, and thrice as many would have answered if they had not been too far off to hear the invitation. He quickly picked out a dozen, and I afterwards learned that they were all unmarried men.

I tried to persuade him not to risk his life in this matter, as his authority and experience were so necessary to the whole expedition, and I instanced the case of a general on the field of battle. But he would have none of my arguments. It was his simple faith that a captain should

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be the last to leave his sinking ship, and the example of generals did not appeal to him.

In less than five minutes every arrangement was complete. We resolved to take the guns with us, and leave only the two Maxims to hold the north wall. The enemy on that side would not be likely to notice the withdrawal of the main force, as all our fighting had been done under cover, and they had no means of judging of the number of defenders left. Our departure would, of course, be noticed from the castle, and probably by the troops in the distance, but we should get a start of these, and might beat them off if they came too close. It was, however, absolutely necessary to keep back the main attack on the north wall, as if the firing had only ceased for a moment a flood of men would have been poured over the parapet, and our flight detected.

At a given signal the gates were flung open, then we swung out into the open square at a steady trot. The guns brought up the rear, each drawn by twenty men. They were loaded, and the rest of the ammunition was ready to hand. We thought we might have use for them before we reached the forts, which were quite a mile away. Fortunately for us, our path was all down hill, and the whole race would only be a matter of a few minutes.

As we swept past the corner of the house we heard loud shouts and cries, and knew that we had been seen. But Captain Thorlassen had, with admirable judgment and self-sacrifice, moved one of the Maxims to command the direct line between the enemy and us, and no living thing could have passed the stream of bullets that swept the street.

The brave fellows had, however, signed their death warrant. The north side, deprived of half its defence, was rushed at last; and looking back we saw the men fighting and falling round their guns, and caught a glimpse of Captain Thorlassen wielding a huge axe against half a

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dozen spears. Then the Maxims ceased fire, and as we passed round a corner the house was lost to sight.

We were a quarter of a mile on our road now, passing down a wide street of barred doors and shuttered windows. The inhabitants had retreated into their shells until the storm was over. But many a gaping roof and broken wall bore evidence of their unhappy position.

The Princess trotted bravely by my side, her face as white as death. I fancy she was thinking of Captain Thorlassen and the silent Maxims.

Our own people on the forts had seen us, and we saw that the long line of wall was bristling with rifles, and that the muzzles of the guns had been swung into position.

Then, suddenly, behind us we heard the thunder of hoofs and the loud shouts of "Asturnia!" "À Marmorel!" "St. Étoile!" and other battle cries, and, looking back, we saw a wave of steel and pennons sweep across the square and begin to pour down the street. The knights of the castle had been roused from their inactivity, and were coming to break up our retreat.

I grasped the Princess by the arm and hurried her along. Three shells from the forts came hissing over our heads and burst among our pursuers. The check was sufficient to enable us to swing our guns into position and prepare for a stand. It would have been madness to have continued our flight. We should have been ridden down and cut to pieces in less than five minutes. The guns on the forts would be useless directly our enemies came to close quarters, for every shell would kill as many friends as foes. The only possible way of escape was to administer so severe a check that our pursuers would abandon the chase. And this would have to be done in a few minutes or we should be cut off by the troops with whom we had just been fighting.

The knights were only two hundred yards from us when the shells from the forts burst in their midst. And the

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muzzles of our guns were scarcely trained on them before they recovered from their confusion and came thundering down the hill. Six abreast they rode, in glittering armour and emblazonry of gules, argent, and sable, each man with lance in rest, and a huge sword or axe swinging from his side.

We fired our four guns, and every rifle spurted out its message of death, and the hail of iron and lead took them clean abreast, ploughing long lanes of dead and dying through their ranks. I saw the armour bend and crinkle up like tinfoil crumpled in a man's hand. Lances, swords and morions were crushed into a shapeless mass of splintered steel and wood. Men and horses writhed and slipped and sank. But the hearts of these knights were as strong as their iron hands. And out of that hell of destruction came the unhurt and the wounded, leaping the dead bodies of their comrades, trampling them under foot, spurring their horses as their feet slipped in the blood, and rushing at us like an avalanche.

Our rifles spoke three times, and our guns once again before the wave of steel reached us. We literally blew it back from the muzzles of our guns, and the blood spurted in our faces like rain. Then there was a momentary pause, and a silence only broken by cries and curses and groans. Then from the shattered column rose the cry of "À Marmorel!" "À Marmorel!" and the remnant flung themselves out of the smoke upon us with a fury and strength that nothing could resist.

The guns formed a barricade for us. I tell you, Cordeaux, I saw two of these knights seize a fifteen pounder and fling it out of their path, crushing one of the gunners with his own weapon. In less than a minute they had leapt from their horses and were among us like terriers in a pit of rats.

Then began a scene which beggars all description. At close quarters, we were children in their hands. The steel

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of their swords and axes rose and fell in the sun like flashes of lightning, shearing through cutlass and rifle as a knife cuts through cheese. Men fired point blank into the grim faces and died before they could fire again. Sir Thule de Brie had five dead bodies at his feet; he waited with a dripping sword for each knight that came at him, and I could see that he was a mark for every blade. Nothing could stop these terrible men. Half a dozen, at least, were fighting with one arm hanging from its shoulder like a piece of loose pulp, and most of them were streaming with blood.

For my part, I clutched the Princess by the arm and shrank to the rear. I had no thought of making a fight, but only considered how to save her. That was my small part in the contest. I managed to extricate her from the *mêlée*, and slipped into a doorway. The door was closed, and the position could only have given us a moment's breathing space. She clung to my arm and looked up in my face. I do not think she was as frightened as I was, but the sight of the carnage had sickened her woman's heart. I myself knew that death was near to both of us.

Then suddenly arose the cries of men in terror and confusion, the shouts of "Retreat!" "To the forts!" "For your lives!" and a tumbling, fighting *mêlée* of men swept past our shelter down the street. The battle was over. Our brave fellows had given way at last, and it was a case of "*Sauve qui peut.*"

Before I could decide to join in the mad race for life, it was far beyond us, and from the shadow of the doorway we saw none of our own men, save those who were dead.

Then a gigantic shadow passed between us and the light, and stopped. I laid my hand on my revolver, and was ready to fire my last shot into the dark handsome face that looked sternly at us.

"Yield," he cried, "quarter or no quarter." I could

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not help smiling. It sounded so mediæval. But I answered him, as best I could, to the effect that we yielded.

He laid one great hand on each of us, and drew us out into the light. I slipped my revolver back into my pocket. It might be of use some day to myself—or the Princess.

Our captor was a magnificent man, as tall as Sir Thule de Brie and dark as night. His clean-shaven face was streaming with blood from a nasty cut across the forehead, and I saw that his broken helmet had only just saved him from death—it was evidently the work of Sir Thule de Brie. His eyes were keen as those of a hawk, and there was something about his mouth that I did not like. It was hard and cruel, and I trembled to think of what might befall the Princess.

He looked at us both with searching eyes, and as he did so, my gaze was rivetted by his silken surtout. It was torn into shreds, and blackened with powder, but I thought I could recognise the armorial bearings worked thereon. I had seen them when the herald came into the main cabin of the *Aurora*. They were the arms of Count Guy of Marmorel.

He did not condescend to address us further, but handed us over to the charge of two archers, who conducted us to the castle, and we had the unpleasant experience of seeing the shells from our own forts burst all round us.

When we reached the castle, we were—as fortune would have it—thrown into separate cells, and one of us, at least, passed the night in thinking of the other's pain.

CHAPTER XXI

PRISONERS OF WAR

FOR three whole weeks I was confined in the narrow limits of my stone cell, seeing no face but that of the man who brought me my daily portion of food and water, and knowing nothing of the fate of the Princess.

There was a single window in the cell. It was a thin slit, not more than six inches in width, and by standing on tiptoe, I could catch a glimpse of the sea, and part of the forts. The British flag was still flying from the battlements, and I saw that my comrades had not abandoned their position. The ships were still in the bay, and I looked at them with longing eyes, wondering when they would turn their bows to the south again. The discovery of the North Pole seemed to have sunk into insignificance beside the stirring events into which we had plunged ourselves. It appeared ridiculous that men should trouble themselves about such paltry matters as geography and exploration. As far as I could judge, the Pole lay about twenty miles from us, but I will venture to say that the thought of its proximity entered into the minds of but few of those who had left England to look for it. Other and larger matters had risen before our eyes, matters not of mere fame and discovery, but of life and death.

As far as I could see from my tiny window, hostilities appeared to have almost ceased, and indeed, Cordeaux, a single day of such fighting as I had witnessed was enough to glut the most warlike nation on earth. Yet

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I knew that, as far as our men were concerned, the inactivity could only be superficial, and that they were only regaining strength for some desperate enterprise. They knew that the Princess was either dead or a prisoner, and it was certain that they would not rest until they had rescued or avenged her. It was probable that Captain Thorlassen was dead, and that the command had passed to Captain Edwards, of the *Sveltholm*. But I knew that her honour was safe in his hands, and that this rough Englishman would leave no stone unturned to avenge our defeat.

Day after day I saw the sun rise to a lower altitude in the heavens, and day by day the air grew colder and the nights grew longer. From my narrow window I could see the ice pack forming in the south, and I watched it creeping up from the horizon like a long white wall. And as I gazed on it, my thoughts for the moment were taken off the immediate events that confronted me, and I looked into the future, and realised that we were being slowly cut off from our own world by a barrier that it would be almost impossible to pass.

But these thoughts were only momentary; I had so much else on my mind that I was able to think but little of my own fate. I was racked with anxiety about the Princess, of whom my gaoler had told me nothing. I did not even know if she were alive or dead. I wondered if her sex had been discovered, or if she had managed to keep her secret in spite of all the many chances of detection. I asked myself how she would fare at the hands of Count Guy of Marmorel if he once knew her to be a woman, and the answer worked like madness in my brain.

Then one evening my gaoler told me that it was time I worked for my living, and catching me roughly by the shoulder bundled me out of the cell, and gave me a kick that sent me crashing in a heap to the bottom of half a dozen stone steps. I rose almost stunned and trembling in



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every limb. My whole soul rose in revolt against the needless brutality of the act, and if I had had my revolver I should have killed the man where he stood.

He laughed at my white face and flashing eyes, and holding me by the arm in a grip like that of a steel vice, he led me down several long passages into the great hall of the castle.

As we entered I heard loud laughter, and a faint scream of pain or fear. My blood ran cold at the sound, for it was a woman's voice.

I found myself in a room of vast proportions, two hundred feet long, half as wide and quite sixty feet in height. From the walls hung long lines of drooping banners, for the most part torn and faded, but a few of them bright with armorial devices. They were doubtless the ensigns of the various governors of the castle. In times of peace the place was probably the banqueting hall, and reserved for the Governor and his officers, but it was now turned into a kind of barrack room. Stacks of lances, bows and battle axes were piled up against the walls, the tables were littered with jugs and knives, and various remnants of food, and there were at least three hundred men-at-arms in the room, some eating and drinking, some playing games of chance, some laughing and singing uproariously.

My eyes passed rapidly over the scene in search of what I feared to see, until they rested on a large group of men gathered round a huge fire at the far end of the hall. Their tall forms were silhouetted in a black ring against the blaze, and I thought I could see the slender figure of a boy cowering in front of them, and so close to the flames that they seemed to be flickering round his body.

With a sudden wrench I tore myself from the man who held me, leaving a piece of my sleeve in his hand, and dashed down the whole length of the hall. There was a brief silence for a second or two, then, as the men realised

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who I was, there was a loud chorus of laughter, and, as I passed, they pelted me with bones and bits of bread.

One of them put out his leg and tripped me up, but I rose to my feet again and no one troubled to prevent me. But another played me the same trick, and yet another, and by the time I reached the fire I must have fallen half a dozen times, and each fall was greeted with a fresh roar of laughter. They were quite good-tempered about my discomfiture. I scarcely noticed them, but bruised and bleeding I reached the fire at last, and one glance within the circle of men showed me the cowering form of the Princess, her face hidden in her hands, and her whole body trembling with rage or terror. Her cap had fallen off her head, and I noticed with surprise that her hair had been cut short like that of a boy. Three or four lances were pointed close to her body, and she was forced back to within less than a foot of the flaming logs. It was a form of torture not unknown in the rougher days of our public schools, and these semi-barbarians would probably look on it more as a form of sport than as any serious cruelty.

But, knowing who the victim was, and seeing the sufferings of a woman, and, moreover, of the woman I loved, I became for the moment a madman, without control of my reason or thought of future consequences. My blood boiled in my veins, and a red light flashed across my eyes like a stream of blood, and I flung myself on the men nearest to me with the fury of a wild beast, tearing them apart with my hands, and fighting my way through them with such suddenness and strength that I was by the side of the Princess before they could recover from their surprise. I bore the lances to the ground with the full weight of my limbs and body and faced them.

"Are you men?" I cried, using their own language brokenly as best I could, and freely interspersed with Latin, "to torture a—boy like this? If you want anyone to amuse you, you can have me. You cowards! If any

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one of you will come out in the open, I will give him as much sport as he wants. But a boy—I thought you were soldiers, and not curs!”

They withdrew their lances and laughed. My challenge was so idle and so futile that it could not help affording them amusement. Any man of them could have fought me with one hand tied behind his back. But at that moment I felt as though I could have taken any two of them with ease.

They understood enough of what I said to gather what I meant, and the idea seemed to appeal to them. There were exclamations of approval, and some of them shouted to their comrades in distant parts of the room. The crowd round the fire broke up, and the Princess came to my side. There were tears in her eyes, and her clothes were singed and blackened.

“You must not do this,” she whispered hurriedly, “they will kill you. I must tell them who I am. I should have done so, if you had not come.”

“No,” I replied sternly, “you shall not tell them. Do you realise what it would mean—with these rough men. It would be worse for you than death.”

“There is still chivalry in Asturnia,” she replied, with flashing eyes.

“These are not knights,” I answered, “but men whose souls have been crushed out of them by generations of servitude. You shall not tell them.”

“Come along, Sir Cockcrow,” cried one of the men, catching me by the arm. “You have promised us sport, and we mean to have it. Otherwise, the boy goes back to the fire.”

He dragged me into the centre of the room. The men had all left their tables and had gathered themselves into a wide ring. Their grim faces were lit up with the expectation of some unusual amusement.

Then a heavy bludgeon of oak was thrust into my hand,

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and I saw the crowd open on either side of the ring to let someone through. It was my opponent, and even the sense of my unpleasant position could not prevent me from smiling when I saw his grotesque figure waddle out into the centre of the room.

He was a man of about my own height, but so enormously broad and stout that he seemed like a dwarf. He must have measured nearly four feet from shoulder to shoulder, and about ten feet round the waist. His limbs were of proportionate thickness, and looked like great bolsters of flesh. I am myself, as you know, a very thin man, and the sense of ludicrous contrast had, I suppose, prompted them in the choice of their champion. In his right hand this monstrosity grasped a huge stick about the thickness of a scaffolding pole. In spite of his unwieldy flesh, he was, in all probability, of enormous strength, and a single blow from that piece of timber would have been sufficient to kill an ox. I noticed, however, that he moved slowly, and with so much difficulty that it would be impossible for him to get near me if I chose to avoid him.

The whole crowd roared with laughter as we faced each other. I set my teeth and gripped my stick more firmly in my hand. I was determined to make some sort of a fight of it, though I was tempted to keep well out of the man's reach, and I think I should have done so if the Princess had not been there to see me do battle on her behalf.

I walked quietly up to within striking distance of him, and as he raised his ponderous arm and weapon to strike me, brought my stick down on his hand with such force that it would have broken the fingers of an ordinary man. It might just as well have fallen on a rubber cushion, and though I saw the blood spurt up, he did not loose his hold, and I only just sprang back in time to avoid a crushing blow, which would have probably ended my career once and for all.

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Again and again I struck him, now on the face, now on the legs, now on the shoulders, and each time I went in peril of my life, but escaped untouched. It was like beating at the trunk of an oak tree, and his huge face, which was streaming with blood, broke out occasionally into a broad smile at my puny efforts.

"How like you being tickled with a straw, Orbeuil?" cried one of the men to him, and I have no doubt that my blows were of as little annoyance to him as flicks with a feather. I was getting exhausted, and noticed with some apprehension that I was less nimble in avoiding his blows. One of them grazed my shoulder, and another caught my stick with such force that it fell twenty feet away from me. I picked it up, before he could reach it, but I began to be more careful. I did not close with him so often, and I tried to tire him out by retreating round and round the ring.

Then at last I struck him so fierce a blow across the top of his head that the stick broke, and staggering back from the force of the concussion, I stepped on the broken piece and came crashing to the ground. When I looked up, he was standing over me, and the huge piece of timber was raised above his head. There was terrific applause from the spectators, and I heard the faint cry of a woman.

"Not with that, Orbeuil," cried someone, "not with that. Count Guy wants the prisoners alive, not dead." A man rushed into the ring and handed him a slender cudgel, about as thick as an ordinary walking stick. I watched the change with a faint smile of interest, but with little satisfaction. It was still a formidable weapon in the hands of this giant.

"Now will you yield, Sir Cockcrow?" he cried, with a hoarse chuckle, "and let the boy go back to the fire."

"No," I replied faintly, "I will not yield."

For answer he caught me across the arm with the stick, and I felt as though it had been touched with a red hot

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iron. But the blow raised me to action, and struggling to my knees, I gripped my leathern jerkin and pulling myself to my feet caught hold of his stick, with both hands before he could strike again. The spectators cheered and laughed, and for one moment I saw the white face of the Princess peering between the shoulders of two stalwart men.

Orbeuil looked down in my face for a second with a broad grin, then he caught hold of the stick with both his hands and swung me clean off my feet into the air. I set my teeth and was determined not to let go, though I could have easily dropped to the ground and escaped.

He held me high above his head and began to swing me slowly round in a circle. My head swam, and my arms were nearly torn from their sockets, but I locked my fingers on the bar of oak, and held on like a drowning sailor to the plank that floats between him and death. If either of us had let go I should have been swung out into the circle of spectators like a sack of coals. Then he suddenly stopped, and brought me down on the ground with so great a shock that I lost consciousness.

When I came to, they were pouring water on my face. I saw the Princess looking at me with tears in her eyes, and it was worth any pain to see so tender a look of pity.

Orbeuil was for finishing the work he had begun, and waved his stick lightly over my head. But some of the bystanders were against it, and cried out that I had proved my pluck. It was put to the vote, and I watched the uplifted hands with strained eyes. Orbeuil gained the day by a substantial majority, and the crowd fell back to let him thrash me. It was decided that he was only to have a dozen strokes, but I had no doubt in my own mind that he would manage to give me all he wanted in that limited number. I was too bruised and shaken to rise again, and too proud to cry out for mercy.

He lifted his stick, but before he could strike, there was

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a sudden stir in the crowd, and the Princess sprang to my side with flaming cheeks and flashing eyes.

"You cowards!" she cried in their own language. "Do you know why this man is suffering at your hands, and why he will not speak to ask anything of you?" She stopped and faced them like a young tigress. I motioned her to be silent, but she turned her head, and I saw that nothing would stop her now.

Murmurs of astonishment went round the ring of men. They had been addressed in their own language, not spoken as I had tried to speak it, but perfectly, and with the accent of high birth and the tones of authority.

"I will tell you why," she continued. "I am a woman, and this true gentleman has defended me with his life, and would rather die than tell my secret. I am a woman, and—I am not afraid." She buried her face in her hands to hide her blushes.

There was a loud burst of laughter from the spectators, and they crowded round her with rude stares and coarse jests. Orbeuil held out his hand and raised me to my feet. "If it was for a woman," he said, "it was well done, and well borne. I will stand by you both—but how shall we know?"

"Aye," cried the others, "how shall we know?" and one of them knocked the cap from her head.

"This is no woman," he cried. "We must see more than a head of curly hair," and he laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Stand back, you brutes," she cried, lifting her hands from her face, and dealing him such a stinging blow on the cheek that the marks of her five fingers stood out red upon it. "Take me to one of the women of the house, and she will satisfy you."

"Aye, aye," they laughed, "a good excuse, my young cockerel; but the women of our house care not for the company of boys."

The Princess Thora

"You devils," I cried, struggling to be free from the grasp of Orbeuil's arm. "Have you no shame? If you knew who this lady was, you would bite your tongues out before you spoke. I tell you Count Guy of Marmorel will have a word for some of you. Take this lady to the women of your household, if you have a spark of honour in your vile bodies."

"Nay, nay," they cried, "we will see for ourselves," and one of them again grasped the Princess by the shoulder.

It was the man's last action on this earth. There was a quick stir in the crowd, the clank of steel, exclamations and a falling back of men. Then a gigantic black-visaged knight sprang to the struggling girl, and dealt her tormentor such a terrible blow in the face with his spiked and armoured fist that the fellow dropped like a log to the ground, and his features were battered and torn out of all recognition. I looked at the knight's face and recognised it. It was Count Guy of Marmorel himself.

"Take that man and hang him from the battlements," he said quietly. "But let him come to his senses first, so that he may repent of his sins."

Half a dozen men laid hold of the prostrate figure. The blood was pouring from his forehead, and his face was terrible to look upon. "He is dead, my lord," said one of them; "the spike of your gauntlet has pierced his brain."

"So much the less trouble," the knight answered; "remove him; and hark you, my soldiers, I do not take prisoners to provide sport for your idleness."

They removed the body, and the crowd dispersed to different parts of the room, leaving us three by ourselves. The Princess had buried her face in her hands and was trembling from head to foot. Count Guy turned sharply to me.

"Who is this wench?" he said slowly; "your wife? your——"

"Stop, Sir Guy," I cried, "I am but her servant."

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"I have heard," he continued slowly, looking hard at the Princess, "that there was only one woman on your ship. Is that so?"

"There were two," I replied. It was not necessary to tell him that one was dead.

"And which of the two is this?" he said.

I hesitated, but the Princess raised her crimson and tear-stained face from her hands, and drawing herself up proudly looked straight into his eyes.

"Sir Guy," she said quietly, "you are a knight and a gentleman. I fear no ill from you. I am the Lady Thora de Brie, and you received your knighthood at my father's hands."

CHAPTER XXII

A BIRD IN A GILDED CAGE

FROM the hour that the Princess declared herself to Count Guy of Marmorel, we ceased to be companions in adversity. For a whole fortnight I never set eyes upon her sweet face, but I heard the soldiers say that she had been given a magnificent suite of rooms for her own private use, that she was clothed as became her high station, and that a dozen attendants administered to her wants. They compared her to a bird in a gilded cage, and did not spare their jests on the matter. I learnt from them what manner of man Count Guy was, and that he was not in the habit of bestowing favours for nothing, and as I listened to their coarse laughter and innuendoes my heart grew cold within me.

For myself, I was set to do the most menial tasks of the household, and though I had won a certain amount of favour and esteem by my combat with Orbeuil, yet I was still looked upon as the lawful butt of practical jokes and clumsy wit, and I often wished myself back in my solitary cell.

During these days of separation, darkness completely settled down on the land, and I saw for the first time how these extraordinary people had succeeded in creating an artificial daylight for themselves. The Princess and Sir Thule de Brie had previously told me of the great fires which during the winter night blazed for twelve hours out of every twenty-four, but now I had an opportunity of seeing the strange spectacle with my own eyes.

A Bird in a Gilded Cage

As far as the eye could reach long columns of brilliant flame leapt up into the darkness. The town itself was a blaze of light, and the summit of every hill was crowned with fire. The first impression I had of this wonderful sight was that these flames served only to magnify the sense of the great darkness over the land, but when my eyes grew accustomed to the light I realised that every detail of the landscape was clear to me. The Asturnians had very nearly succeeded in turning night into day, and it was possible for them to carry on the ordinary pursuits of life through all the Arctic winter.

One of these pillars of light was just outside the castle walls, and I took the opportunity of examining it more closely. It issued straight from the rocky ground through a brick-lined funnel some four feet in diameter, and went roaring and spurting skywards to a height of over forty feet. The heat from it was so great that although it was twenty yards away from me, I could scarcely put my head out of the window. I noticed that a great steel lid several inches in thickness swung downwards on hinges from the side of the funnel, and that long steel chains trailed away from it over the ground. The bricks and part of the lid were white hot. The fire was lit by the simple expedient of leaving a burning torch by the edge, retiring to a distance, and raising the cover by chains. It was extinguished by the mere closing of the lid.

A peculiar feature of these fires was the clockwork regularity with which they were lit and extinguished—a regularity which, I understood, had not been broken for five centuries, and which was as sacredly observed as any tenet of the national religion. I learnt that in the far past a wise Archbishop of Avranches—the representative of the Pope in that remote island of the north—had proclaimed the curse of God on all or any who might disturb the regular sequence of artificial day and night, and either light or extinguish the fires for their own private ends.

The Princess Thora

This proclamation, prompted by the wisdom of man, had come to be regarded as an edict of the Almighty.

I could see at a glance the origin of the flames. 'They were simply jets of natural gas, which poured out from some sulphurous reservoir, and I was confirmed in my opinion that the whole island was but a crust on the surface of some great internal fire. It was small wonder that the Asturnians were able to cope with the rigours of an Arctic winter. But, as I watched the bluish white light go streaming up to the sky, I wondered how this nation could live so cheerfully in the present, without fears for their future existence. It seemed to me like living on a barrel of gunpowder with a million sparks flying round it. Only complete ignorance could produce such a calm disregard of the possibilities of a terrible catastrophe. Though doubtless a practical Asturnian would have answered any scientific conjectures on my part with the simple statement that the country had existed for eight centuries, and might well last another thousand years.

The Asturnians, however, provided in this manner with an artificial light which enables them to pursue their occupations during the winter months, lived a life not very different in scope and character from that of their ancestors in Normandy. They have made but little progress in anything but the art of war, and the continual feuds between rival lords, and between various hostile parties in the state, have left but little time for men to think of aught but the sharpness of their swords and the strength of their habitations. Yet even this endless warfare has served one good purpose, for it has kept down the population within reasonable limits.

The country itself seems to be a land of plenty. It is remarkably rich in fruit and cereals. The earth is a veritable hotbed, and plants spring up with the rapidity of mushrooms. The corn is sown in May and reaped in August. In the same period trees bud, and blossom, and

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bear fruit, and lose their foliage. Vines and olive trees, stunted but prolific, are in abundance. Fish swarm round the coast. A species of musk ox and a multitude of hares and birds supply as much flesh as the nation can consume. A kind of spider, which appears to be almost too abundant, spins a fine substance which is scarcely distinguished from silk. This provides clothing for the rich. The poor depend on skins and the feathers of birds, which they weave into wonderful garments.

The more barren parts of the island are rich in gold, silver, iron, copper, and lead. But for the six months of darkness, which at present would weigh heavily on my nerves, the island seems to be a most desirable place.

I propose, Cordeaux, at some future date, to write you a detailed account of this nation and country. For the present I am unwilling to interrupt the course of my narrative with more than these few passing remarks.

When a fortnight had elapsed, I received a summons to attend the pleasure of the Princess Thora. An effeminate and silk-clad youth brought the message, and with an escort of two soldiers, conducted me to her private apartments.

I passed through three ante-rooms. The first was inhabited by a young squire and a file of ten soldiers; the second, which was handsomely decorated, was empty save for a couple of brilliantly-dressed pages playing some game at a table in the corner. The third, at the door of which we knocked, contained four members of the fair sex, three of them young and beautiful women gorgeously attired, and the fourth an elderly person of somewhat forbidding aspect. The youth with me stopped and bowed.

"Is it her Highness's pleasure to receive us?" he said with a sly glance at one of the girls. The old lady rose with an air of exceeding dignity, and knocking at the door

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on the far side of the room, entered and closed it behind her.

I looked round the room and almost felt inclined to turn back. My heart was chilled at the sight of so much form and ceremony. I began to realise to the full the distance that lay between me and the woman I loved. On board ship she had been little more than a sweet and noble woman, of a proud and dignified manner indeed, but not set apart in a world of her own, nor fenced about with pomp and circumstance. Here she was housed as a queen, while I was cleaning up the pots and pans in the soldiers' kitchen. And then there was Count Guy of Marmorel—a man who never spent his gold in vain. What purpose had this tall dark-visaged warrior? He was a knight and a gentleman, but——

My unpleasant reveries were broken by the re-entrance of the duenna. She signified that Count Guy of Marmorel and the Lady Thora would receive us. The soldiers fell back respectfully on each side of the door, and I followed the page into the apartment.

It was a large room with a vaulted ceiling. This was painted a pale blue with golden stars, and the walls were hung so thickly with a damask of dark blue and gold that not an inch of their grey stone could be seen. The floor was strewn deep with rushes, and a huge fire of logs blazing in the open hearth filled the whole apartment with a warm glow of heat and light.

The Princess was not alone with Count Guy of Marmorel, and for that I gave much thanks. A slender, fair-haired girl was in attendance on her, and the two were laughing together on a couch as I entered. Count Guy stood a few paces off. He was clad in complete armour, save for his plumed helmet, which lay upon the table. He was apparently lost in thought. He did not look up as I crossed the room, but gnawed his moustache and frowned.

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My dear lady rose to her feet, and stepping forward a pace or two to meet me, stretched out her hand. I bent upon one knee and kissed it.

"My dear friend," she said in English, "my dear friend. How much you have suffered for my sake. It is impossible to repay you by any word or deed of mine."

"I am repaid already," I replied, rising to my feet, and loosing her little hand from mine, "and am willing to let you run up a larger debt. The security is ample."

She laughed, but there was a tender look on her face which did not escape the keen eyes of Count Guy of Marmorel. He did not understand the words that passed between us, but I saw the lines deepen on his face, and he gave an impatient movement which brought the sword at his side clanking against the leg of the table.

"You can go, D'Arcy," he said sharply to the page, who bowed and left the room. Then he turned to me, and the expression on his face was not a pleasant one.

"The Lady Thora," he said slowly, as if weighing every word, "has told me of your good services. She desires that you be in attendance on her, and her desire amounts to a command. Do you understand what I am saying?"

I nodded assent. I understood him to mean a gallant compliment to the Princess, which I did not relish, and I bit my lips with rage.

"I am assured," he continued, "that you know your station in life, and that you know hers, and what is due to her. You will of necessity not presume on your past services." He stopped and smiled at the dark flush that rose over my face. The Princess looked at him with contempt, and her face was like a mask of stone.

"The Lady Thora," he continued, "is my most welcome guest, but is still a prisoner of my lord the king. Any attempt at escape on her part will involve punishment. We do not inflict punishment on women, but we shall hang you from the battlements."

The Princess Thora

I bowed. "I thank you, Count Guy," I said, speaking the language as best I could. "I will accept the service and all the risks attached to it."

And so once more I was brought into contact with my dear lady. I was clothed in silks and satins, richly embroidered with gold, and became a fourth page in waiting, a part which sat rather absurdly on my shoulders. I had little work to do, but from the date of my appointment, my three companions held sinecures. If anything was required, it was I who was summoned, and every little task was an excuse for a few minutes' conversation. This created no jealousy. The others were left more free to lounge and flirt in the ladies' chamber.

I noticed, however, that I was never allowed to see the Princess alone. The fair-haired girl, who was, so I learnt, no less a person than Count Guy's daughter, the Lady Margaret de Marmorel, was always in attendance. She was a charming girl, sweet both in face and temperament, and I lost no opportunity of making myself pleasant to her, though I often wished she would leave us a little to ourselves. Count Guy, on the other hand, had many interviews with my lady alone. On those occasions his daughter would absent herself on some excuse or other, and no page or lady-in-waiting ever interrupted the interviews. And every time the knight strode through our room on his way to her chamber, my mind became a seething hell of doubt, suspicion, and despair. I clenched my hands, and averted my face from his, and would have sprung at his throat, if common sense had not prevailed and whispered in my ear that my death would in no way improve the situation.

Yet when he returned from these visits, my heart beat fiercely with joy and hope, for he generally came back like a thunderstorm, with darkened brow and flashing eye, and a look on his face that boded ill for anyone in his path. I chuckled with savage glee at every little sign of

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his wrath and discomfiture. My lady was evidently not too kind to him.

For a whole week I had the wild idea in my head that Count Guy was attempting to dishonour my dear lady, and that she had spurned his advances with such firmness and regularity that she had driven him to a state of mind bordering on madness. I had started with this idea, founded on a fairly accurate estimate of Count Guy's character, and had not stopped to reason the matter out. But one day, after Count Guy had gone in, I happened to be in the ladies' room and saw the Lady Margaret come out, with an arch smile on her pretty face, and like a flash of lightning a new and more reasonable suspicion entered my mind. The Lady Margaret was evidently helping her father in his campaign. It was hardly likely that she would assist him in another woman's downfall, or even that he would ask her to do so. Count Guy was a widower. Perhaps he intended marriage; though at first sight marriage with the sworn enemy of his "lord, the king," seemed an unlikely and even impossible event. But on turning the matter over in my mind, a sudden idea struck me, and I resolved to watch and wait until I could learn the truth.

From the broad windows of our ante-room I had an uninterrupted view of the sea and the town. The ice was now within half a mile of the shore, though there was still a passage to east and west, and the vessels were lying quite close to the forts. The English flag still fluttered in the breeze, and night* after night searchlights played over the town and castle, and threw white lines across the room in which I slept.

For hours in the day-time, by the light of the great

* Whenever the words "night" or "day" are used in my narrative during the winter months, they merely signify the Asturnians' own division of the twenty-four hours into equal periods of light and darkness.

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fires, I would watch the small black specks moving along the decks of the vessels, and behind the parapets of the long sea wall, and was thankful for this one link with my companions. But I looked in vain for any sign of activity on their part. After the defeat, they seemed to have settled down to a kind of armed neutrality, content to let the Princess work out her own affairs in her own way, and apparently careless of what happened to either her or her kingdom. But I knew in my heart that this could not really be so. Sir Thule de Brie was still with them, and I knew that he would not rest until he had rescued his mistress or died in the attempt. Still, it was strange that no word or sign had come from him. I certainly expected that he would have made some effort to communicate with us.

Meanwhile, I watched my dear lady's face for some signs by which I could read the story of Count Guy of Marmorel. She never spoke of him, except in terms that could have been applied to any kind and courteous host. I think a nice delicacy on her part prevented her from discussing him in his daughter's presence, even though she spoke in a language that the daughter could not understand. And the Lady Margaret was always with her, so we had no opportunity of talking alone. All the information that I could glean was written on her sweet face. I noticed with anxiety that it grew paler from day to day. I might have put this down to her enforced captivity if I had not also noticed the shadows in her eyes and the new lines of thoughtfulness and perplexity on her fair white brow. It seemed to me that she was thrashing out some problem in her mind, and was unable to find a satisfactory solution.

Then one day the whole truth was flashed before my eyes like a blaze of lightning across a dark sky. On October 20th I was serving my lady in some trivial matter—I think I had to convey some message to the kitchen

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about her meal—when the Lady Margaret went suddenly white as a sheet, and leant back on her stiff oaken chair with closed eyes. In a second the Princess was by her side, holding her hand, and using such words as women have towards each other on these occasions. The girl opened her eyes, and asked to be excused from attendance for a few minutes. The Princess opened the door and summoned a stern duenna to assist her from the room. The door closed, and we were alone. I knew Count Guy's instructions, and realised that it would not be for more than a minute or two, until the slight confusion had settled down. I resolved to come to the point at once.

"Poor girl," the Princess murmured; but I am afraid that I dismissed the Lady Margaret from my mind with an indifference that amounted to brutality.

"Lady Thora," I cried, coming up close to her, "we are alone for the first time since—since that awful night of defeat and bloodshed. I want to know the truth. I have no right to ask it, save that I wish to serve you. But I want to know the truth. What does Count Guy of Marmorel require of you?"

She stepped back from me with a look of surprise, and even of anger, on her face. Her eyes blazed, and for a second I lowered my own. Then I looked her squarely and unflinchingly in the face.

"What does Count Guy of Marmorel want with you?" I repeated slowly and sternly. "If you cannot answer me, I will ask him myself."

For a few seconds her eyes met mine, and I fought them with my own till the light of anger died away in their depths, and the blood rushed to her cheeks. She opened her mouth to speak. Then there was a sound of voices in the outer room, and I could hear the clank of steel. "It is Count Guy," she cried, catching me by the arm.

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"Well," I said quietly, "so much the better. I can ask him what I want to know."

"If he finds you here, he will kill you," she cried, looking up into my face. "Quick, Dr. Silex, you must hide. For my sake, for my sake." She looked at me in such a way that no resolution of man could have held out against the appeal.

I slipped behind some hangings which covered a small recess in the wall, and she held out her hand. I kissed it, and a moment later the door opened, and I shrank into my place of concealment. Through a small rent in the damask, no bigger than a threepenny piece, I saw Count Guy, tall, handsome and soldier-like, on the threshold. He was clad in complete armour, as if prepared for war, and his dark face was lit up as though he anticipated a victory.

CHAPTER XXIII

A TRAITOR TO THE KING

FOR a moment he stood in silence. The Princess bowed stiffly, and looked at him with questioning eyes. It was evident that his love suit was not prospering as he would wish. He turned round, and, closing the door, walked across the room to her side.

"You are alone?" he said quietly, giving a swift glance round the apartment. I shrank closer to the wall, and began to wish that I held some weapon in my hand. It was probable that someone outside had told him that I was in attendance on the Princess.

"Your daughter is not well," she answered, "as perhaps you saw before you entered."

"I saw nothing," he cried passionately, "and thought of nothing but you, my dearest queen. I have news from the king of the highest importance, and I can stay but a few minutes. He upbraids me with inactivity, and asks me why I have not blotted out your followers from the face of his land."

"He would get an answer to that," she replied with a smile, "if he came himself."

"Aye, if he came here and saw me now," he said tenderly.

"I meant," she replied coldly, "that he would find a quite sufficient answer, if he asked it a quarter of a mile from the mouth of our guns."

"Pshaw," he said, "you do not think I am afraid. We can afford to lose a few men. Numbers must tell in the

The Princess Thora

end. But why talk to me like that? You know the reason of my inactivity. You know why I have spared your followers. You know why I, Count Guy of Marmorel, have forfeited my sworn honour as a knight."

"It is no honour to serve your king—a murderer and a tyrant. You swore to serve my father. He gave you your knighthood, yet you helped to steal the kingdom from his only child."

Count Guy came a little closer to her. "It is possible to make amends," he said in a low voice. She looked at him steadily. I do not know what he read in her eyes, but I saw his own flash dangerously.

"A man may make a mistake," he continued; "he may repent, and wish to make honourable amends."

"And why should Count Guy of Marmorel repent?" she asked. "He is high in the service of his king, and may rise higher."

"Aye," he muttered, "and he may rise higher."

"He is a bulwark of his lord and master," she went on in a voice that must have cut the man to the heart, if he really loved her. "If all I hear is true, he props up the rotten edifice he helped to build."

Count Guy was silent for a moment. Then a burst of passion seized him. He caught her by the arms and looked into her face as though he would devour it. "The bulwark is broken," he cried, "shattered, crumbled into a thousand pieces—and you have broken it, and may break my heart as well. Lady Thora, I have asked you to be my wife. I love you with all the passion of a man whose conquests have been on the battle-field rather than in the courts of love. I care for nothing if I have not you. The favours of the king! Bah, toys for fools! If you will consent to be my wife, I will forswear all, king, country, wealth, position, everything, absolutely everything! I will return with you in secret to the forts. We will embark on your ships. There is always a few hundred

A Traitor to the King

yards of clear water round these coasts. We will wait until the summer, until the ice breaks up, and we can return to those other countries you speak of."

I knew that he spoke idly, for it was more than likely that the ice barrier would never be broken again. But the Princess Thora looked straight into his eyes and I could read nothing from her face.

"I do not love you," she said slowly; "I shall never love you, Count Guy of Marmorel. You are a brave and honourable soldier, according to the standard of this unhappy land, but there is too much blood between us. I thank you for your offer. Made to a captive, from whom you might have enforced favours and not sued for them, it does you much credit."

"I am the captive," he said, loosing her arms and striding across the room to the window, "and you have made my captivity very hard for me."

"I am sorry," she replied simply. He returned swiftly to her side, and in the white light of the flaring fires outside his armour looked like some tall pillar of flame.

"Why do you tempt me?" he said; "you know I am all powerful in this castle. Why do you tempt me to do you wrong? I tell you my passion has so burnt up my brain, that before long I shall not know the difference between good and evil." Then he suddenly pressed his great hands to his face, and his whole frame shook. For a few seconds he did not speak; then he flung himself on one knee and kissed her hand.

"Forgive me," he cried hoarsely; "I did not mean it. I was taken beyond myself."

"I know," she answered softly; "I know, too, that Count Guy of Marmorel is a gentleman, and a soldier who will fight even with temptation."

He walked over to the window, and looked out on the sea. For quite a minute there was complete silence. I wished myself far away. I was dishonoured by listening

The Princess Thora

to the outpourings of this man's heart, and was almost tempted to reveal myself. But I reflected that this would mean my death. Count Guy was in no mood to trifle with an eavesdropper. So I consoled myself with the thought that I was an unwilling listener.

"Come here," he said suddenly, "I want to show you something," and the Princess walked slowly over to his side.

"Well?" she asked. "I have looked from that window often, and there is nothing I do not know."

"There," he said mechanically, and as though not heeding her reply, "are your forts. Beyond are your ships. Beyond them again a plain of ice stretching as far as the eye can reach, a barrier that will not break until many months of darkness have passed."

"It will never break," she said quietly.

"There is your little army," he continued, "some six hundred in number, if indeed we have left so many of them. Rats in a trap, with ultimate starvation staring them in the face."

"You know nothing of their supplies," she broke in.

"Rats in a trap," he continued, not heeding the interruption, "waiting until we choose to kill them. Their guns, from what I have learnt, cannot be fed for ever. A week of such fighting as we had in the last battle will silence them. But our swords will only grow sharper with combat. We have so many men that we can afford to throw life after life against you, until we wear you out. And our soldiers will not spare themselves. As you know, battle is the life and breath of the Asturnian. Starvation! Ruin! Death! That is the prospect that you see from the window, Lady Thora. Do you see it now in a new light?"

"I have seen it like that before," she replied, "when I was weak and foolish. When I am brave and sensible I only see a gallant band of strong-hearted men who will

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not rest till they have torn your king from his throne." As she spoke her eyes flashed, and she drew herself to her full height. Count Guy folded his arms and regarded her with a faint smile.

"Lady Thora," he said in a cold and quiet voice, "it is possible to be both brave and foolish. You know as well as I do that you are a prisoner in an almost impregnable castle, that twenty thousand men are at my service to keep you here, and that your expedition is doomed."

She was silent. Then she suddenly turned round on him. "Why do you wish to impress these facts on my mind?" she cried sharply. "If they are true, will your presence on the ship as my husband save any lives, or give me my kingdom?"

He did not answer, but left her side, and paced up and down the room several times, as though meditating some new move in the game. I could see that he was biting his lips and that his hands were clenched. Then he suddenly stopped, and, drawing his sword from its belt, cast it on the floor at the Lady Thora's feet.

"That is my answer to your question," he said. "I am your servant. I will fight for you and with whom you will."

She looked at him hard, as though she scarcely realised what he meant. "With whom I will?" she asked in a low voice. "What do you mean, Count Guy?"

He did not answer for a moment, but looked upon the ground, and a red flush came to his cheek. Then, after the pause, he raised his eyes to her face.

"I mean," he said slowly, "that there are ten thousand men in the king's army who would follow me anywhere and in any cause, and that the king himself only retains his throne by the will of his soldiers. Do you understand me now?"

A strange and new light flashed into her face, and my heart grew cold as I watched her features. Then it died

The Princess Thora

away and gave place to a quick look of horror and disgust.

"I understand you, Count Guy," she answered, "the king is fortunate in having such a servant. I did not know it was possible to buy the honour of a knight of Asturnia."

"I can bear your taunts," he said in a passionless voice; "we are discussing business now. I have made you an offer and have named the price."

She moved away from the window, and her feet struck the sword that lay upon the floor. She stopped suddenly and laughed.

"I understand you now, Count Guy," she said contemptuously; "you have played the part of an ardent lover to perfection. You have not been wooing me, but a kingdom. By yourself you could never reach the throne. I am the daughter of a king to whose memory all the poorer classes are still devoted. If I were by your side, the whole country would rise and support our arms. I am your stepping-stone, and you tempt me with an offer of that which is nearest and dearest to my heart. I do understand you, Sir Guy—now."

He made a step towards her, and caught her by the wrists. "By all the saints!" he cried out, "you do me a great wrong, Lady Thora. It is not I who have tempted you. It is you who have tempted me—to sacrifice my honour as a knight. I love you more than a thousand kingdoms. Can you not read it in my face? Can you not hear it in my voice?"

She looked at him coldly. "When I was in England," she said, "I saw men and women pretend to be what they were not and feign emotions that they did not feel—for the amusement of the people. They feigned the passion of love most wonderfully."

"You will drive me mad," he cried hoarsely.

"There is, however," she continued in cold, even tones,

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"no need to discuss the question of love. It is indifferent to me whether you love me or not—save, perhaps, that my woman's vanity is a little piqued. Your proposed bargain is a purely commercial one. I do not love you, and it is perhaps better that there should be no sentiment on either side."

"You are right," he replied in a voice as calm as her own. "It is purely a matter of business. Look on me as an instrument, a means to an end, an opportunity of gratifying the true love of your heart—the welfare of your country. On the one hand, I sell you an army, and—my honour."

"On the other," she replied, "I sell you the key to the hearts of the people—and myself. It is well to be plain about the matter."

"It is well to be plain," he said. "These are the terms. Do you accept or refuse them?"

She moved once more to the window and looked out to where the great barrier of ice stretched along the horizon. From the look on her face I think she realised that Count Guy had spoken the truth. The fate of the expedition was sealed. Her followers were rats in a trap, waiting until their foes chose to kill them. My heart was sick with pain and apprehension. She could fulfil her dearest hopes and ambitions with a single word, and with the same word could strike out all the happiness from my life.

Count Guy came to her side. "Before you choose," he said, "I would place the matter clearly before you. I can fulfil my part of the bargain. The king has oppressed his country, and his throne is tottering on its foundations. You yourself have said that I support it. If I withdraw my support, the kingdom falls. I will take no advantage of you. I will not ask you to marry me until you have been crowned Queen of Aturnia. There will be no misalliance. The blood of kings runs in my own veins."

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She was still silent and looked out across the ice. And even as she looked, the Great Fires suddenly died out and the night began. And with them all hope died out from my heart.

For I had expected an indignant rejection of the offer, a few scathing words of scorn, a sharp dismissal of the subject. But she was only silent.

"Do you know, too," he continued, "that your followers are in revolt? They have watched the ice close in upon them until they are sick with terror. Three-quarters of the men are for leaving you to your fate. Any moment these ships of yours may go west in search of some escape from their prison. It is no time for maidenly scruples and delays. Remember that this is merely a marriage of convenience, and remember, too, that to-morrow you may look from that window and see nothing but an empty waste of ice and sea."

"How do you know this?" she asked quickly, without looking at him.

"I have been in correspondence with your leaders," he replied; "I have suggested to Sir Thule de Brie the possibility of my assistance."

"And did you mention the price you ask?"

"No, I did not mention the price I ask. I do not ask it of Sir Thule de Brie."

Again there was silence, and I heard nothing but the beating of my own heart and the rustling of the rushes, as Count Guy stirred them with one of his feet.

"Remember your love for your country," he said, after a pause; "remember your oppressed people."

But still there was silence.

"Your followers have sacrificed their lives in this cause," he continued. "Are you not prepared to sacrifice anything?"

But still there was silence.

Then suddenly I saw the face of the Princess faintly

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silhouetted against the window. I started, for the only light outside that I knew of was due to the reflection from the city lamps and the sky. And this could not be occasioned by any such cause. But even as I looked, the patch of sky changed from grey to pink, and from pink to crimson, till the glare of it was reflected on every wall of the room.

"What is happening!" the Princess cried, pointing out across the sea, "what are those fires springing to light in the bay?"

He looked out into the glare, and in the reflection of it I saw a smile of triumph on his face.

"They are your ships," he said quietly; "they are burning; they will never return to England."

"Is this your work?" she cried passionately, turning on him as though she would strike him in the face.

"It is the work of those who love you," he answered. "It is the best reply to those who would leave you to your fate. I suggested it to Sir Thule de Brie when he sent word of the threatened mutiny. By all the saints! he will not be popular with his men to-night."

The Princess buried her face in her hands and was silent. The sight of the burning ships must have filled her mind with a multitude of thoughts. These men were now bound to her for life or death. There was no turning back. Their very lives were given into her hand, and the question that would decide their fate was still unanswered. Count Guy was not slow to press his point.

"Lest they should draw back," he murmured. "Sir Thule de Brie could not have done this by himself. There are others, not men of this country, who have sacrificed themselves that you may be Queen of Asturnia. These rash fellows know their duty. Are you going to leave them to their fate?"

The Princess did not answer, but I knew that she had been driven into a corner. If I had only had my revolver

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I could have cut the whole tangled skein of ruse and argument. But I was unarmed, and the man I had to deal with could have crushed me with one hand.

"Have you no duty to your country?" he continued, and his voice was very tender. She drew herself up and looked at him with a face of stone.

"Count Guy," she said in a hard voice, "I will give you your answer to-morrow morning. I must have the night in which to think it over. When I am by myself, I shall be able to weigh things more clearly in my brain."

He bowed, and raising her hand to his lips, turned on his heel and left the room. When the clank of his steel had died away, I flung myself from my place of concealment with hot words of anger and passion on my lips. The Princess moved towards me, and by the glow of the burning ships I could see the expression on her face. It was such that I could not speak. Pain and doubt and fear and noble resolve were so mingled upon her countenance that all thought of self was thrust aside. I read the answer she would give Count Guy of Marmorel.

"My dear lady," I whispered, "can I help you?"

"By your silence," she replied; "by leaving unsaid what would bias my true judgment. My good and kind friend, I have a great burden to bear, and I must bear it alone."

"I know, I know," I answered, "and I would help you."

"You do not know all," she said, turning her eyes away from mine. I took her hand and lifted it to my lips, but when I recalled who had kissed it last, I dropped it as though it had stung me, and crept to the door with bowed head and clenched hands.

At the door I turned, and for one brief moment I imagined I saw a look of love and pity upon her face. But when I looked again I saw nothing but a cold mask of stone, gazing out into the red glare on the sea.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE DEATH SONG

THE next morning I heard from one of the pages that the Lady Thora had consented to become the wife of Count Guy of Marmorel. An hour later we were summoned to a meeting in the great hall of the castle. It was full to its utmost extent with a moving mass of pennons and plumes and spears, and the low murmur that ran through the throng showed me that expectation and discussion ran high. In a few minutes the multitude of men had settled itself into a more orderly disposition. The knights stood in long ranks of steel and blazonry close to the great dais at the end of the hall, next to them the squires and pages, and then stretching to the other end a close mass of archers and men-at-arms.

On the dais itself were placed two chairs, and behind these stood Sir Hugh de la Perche, Lord Fulk of Brabançon, the Lord of Marmontier, and Sir Gascon de Varaville, who were, next to Count Guy of Marmorel, the foremost soldiers of the kingdom. They spoke with one another in a low voice, and I tried in vain to glean from their impassive faces how they looked upon this desperate move. I could not doubt that they viewed it with some degree of favour. Count Guy was too keen a diplomat and too wary a soldier to have made a false step. It seemed plain to me that he had already sounded the most influential men around him, and was unlikely to say anything which would bring the sword of every loyal subject to his breast. This was but the final move in a long-

The Princess Thora

premeditated and thought-out game. The knights would be on his side. For the common soldiers he would care little. In a kingdom where internecine wars were so fierce and so constant as to have kept down the population for eight centuries, they would care little what master they served so long as they saw their way to victory and a certainty of being paid their wages. It would rest with the knights, their feudal lords, to direct their wills and energies.

Then a sudden hush came over the whole assembly, and the murmurs died away like falling echoes. I looked at the dais and saw an open door behind the chairs, and beyond it the bright light from some lamp, and silhouetted against the light the tall figure of a man. He paused but for one second, and then stepped forward a pace, closing the door and advancing towards us. It was Count Guy of Marmorel, clad from head to foot in complete armour, with his blazoned shield on his left arm, and his right hand upon his sword. He gave one keen glance round the whole room, as though estimating the exact attitude of every man's mind, and spoke to the point without beating about the bush.

"Knights of Asturnia," he said, and his voice had the ring of confidence in every word, "knights of Asturnia, and you my faithful followers, who have been with me through years of battle, I have that to tell you aloud which most men would whisper in the council chamber. I have to-day resolved to take a step which may plunge this unhappy country more deep in blood than it has ever stood before, yet which shall purge it from much evil." He paused and watched the faces of his listeners. I may do them a wrong, but it seemed that the prospect of hard fighting illuminated their features with the light of a fierce joy.

"With my own hand," he continued, "I set your king upon his throne—with my own hand and by your help.

The Death Song

It seemed that the good of the nation required it, and that much wrong would be righted thereby. I was mistaken, as better men have been mistaken before me. The land has groaned under the hand of a tyrant. The people cry out to Heaven, and God has answered them. To-day I give myself for an instrument of vengeance into His hands."

He paused again, and among the soldiers every man looked at his neighbour with a grim face and questioning eyes. The knights alone, as I expected, gave vent to no expression of surprise, but I heard the faint shivering rattle of steel run through their ranks, and I fancy more than one of them loosed his sword from its scabbard. Then a low murmur ran through the assembly, and it swelled into loud questions and the clank of weapons on the stone floor. Then a single voice cried "Traitor!" above the tumult, and a moment later I heard the groans of a dying man drowned in the swell of a great acclamation. The men had spoken. They themselves had sprung from the masses and knew the burden laid upon them. They had only watched for a leader, and now he stood before their eyes, a man triumphant in war, the first soldier of the kingdom. They knew not whither he might lead them, but they were resolved to follow. Count Guy raised his hand, the noise died away like a passing storm, and the room was still once more.

"There is in our midst," he continued, "a lady, by the fortune of war a captive, by birth one of the highest in the land. I myself in my mistaken zeal thrust her from her inheritance. She and her followers have fought for the crown against surpassing odds. She has the welfare of the nation at heart. She has sacrificed much to return to it. She would follow in the footsteps of her father. To whom should the crown go but to this lady to whom it rightfully belongs?" A loud murmur of approval ran through the assembly, and it gradually swelled into a roar

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of applause. The knights alone preserved a dignified silence, and some of them frowned.

"I will bring her before you," said the Count, "and you shall tell her your answer to my question," and with these words he passed through the door, closing it behind him.

When he had gone, a loud buzz of conversation filled the hall. The knights gathered themselves into little groups, and appeared to be engaged in warm disputes with one another. Then the door was flung open, and followed by Count Guy, there appeared a vision so glorious that the whole multitude was stricken with silence. It was the Princess herself.

She swept across the dais before their astonished eyes as I had once seen her before, a glory of cloth of gold and jewelled crown. And as I looked upon her sweet face, white as death, but magnificent in its pride and queenliness, there floated before my eyes a darkened room, with rows of musty books, and piles of strange and curious objects heaped upon the floor. I could almost hear the voice of John Silver saying, "The Princess! My Princess! and perhaps one day—yours."

I looked around me with blinking eyes, and it flashed across me that I was looking on a familiar scene. The knights in armour, the hall of a great fortress, the solid mass of men-at-arms; I had seen all these before in the darkened room at Silent Square. But the scene was real enough now, and in the midst of it, like some golden star, stood the Queen of Asturnia, a woman who had conquered the hearts of every man who had ever seen her, and who now had triumphed over her own heart as well.

My memories were swept from me by a terrific burst of cheering, by the loud clamour of trumpets, by the clang and clash of arms, and for the space of quite three minutes the air glittered with waving swords and spears and pennons. My dear lady looked on the scene with a gracious

The Death Song

smile. She had a part to play and a popularity to win, and only two men in the hall knew the cold pain that gripped her heart. She bowed and moved a little forward, leaning on the arm of Count Guy of Marmorel. Then she opened her lips as though to speak, and the tumult died into silence.

"My people," she said in a clear voice, "my people, I thank you. I have only lived that such a day as this might come." Then her strength forsook her. She buried her face in her hands and shook with emotion. Count Guy led her to one of the chairs, and, when she was seated, he stood by her side with drawn sword and a fierce proud look on his face that boded ill for any who should dispute his right to stand there.

"Knights and men of Asturnia," he said, "I would have you know that the throne of this kingdom is no place for an unprotected woman. She needs by her side one with a grave and subtle mind to advise her, and with a strong right arm to enforce her decrees. This gracious lady has been pleased to choose one, who, though far too unworthy to kiss her hand, has in some small measure the qualities which will ensure the strength of her government. She has done me the honour to consent to be my wife, and I am prepared to uphold her position against all comers." He advanced a step, and loosing his gauntlet from his left hand, flung it with a crash on the stone steps of the dais.

For a moment no one in the hall stirred or spoke. Then Lord Fulk of Brabançon, a grizzled noble of the Northern Province, moved a little forward from his place.

"Surely, Count Guy of Marmorel," he said sternly, "this act is unnecessary. You are among friends, and, if what you have told us be the lady's free and unbiassed will, we are prepared to uphold her choice. I think I express the thoughts of my comrades and their followers."

Every man thundered out a tumultuous "Aye," and the air once more rang with shouts of approval and greeting.

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Count Guy smiled and stepped forward to pick up his glove. But before he reached the step on which it lay, I saw him stop, and it seemed as though he were listening to something.

The cheers ceased, and the eyes of everyone in the hall were on him. They, too, were wondering why he did not pick up his gauntlet from the stone. And in the silence which ensued they heard a sound which had never been heard in the land before. Someone was playing a violin.

But though the instrument was strange to them, the music itself must have spoken very plainly in their minds, for I never saw so great a look of horror and consternation shadow the face of a multitude. Men's countenances grew dark, their lips parted, and their eyes stared at Count Guy of Marmorel, who still paused at the edge of the steps and listened.

"By the saints, what music!" whispered D'Arcy to me.

And music it was, Cordeaux, of such a high order that I felt the wail of its notes in my ears like a song of despair and death. And, as I listened, I realised that I had heard the tune before, and I shuddered at the recollection. Count Guy stepped forward, livid with fury.

"What folly is this?" he cried. "Rievaulx, take a hundred men and search the castle; lock the gates, and do not come back to me until you have hung the musician from the highest tower."

The men began to leave the room, and for a few minutes the music was drowned by the clatter of steel as they pushed their way out of the throng. But when they had disappeared, there was nothing to be heard but the wail of the violin. Everyone in the room listened to it in silence, and I could not understand why the sound had so great an effect on them.

The Lady Thora alone stood with a wrapt expression on her face, as though she were listening to some music of the spheres. Now that the men had departed, there

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was a grim smile on the Count's lips, but the sword in his hand quivered as though it would fain be buried in someone's heart. Then he abruptly moved forward to his gauntlet and picked it up from the floor. And, as he did so, the music ceased.

"Men of Asturnia," he cried, "my challenge has remained unanswered. You are soldiers, and not to be frightened by the pranks of a juggling minstrel. You know me for your leader, and with you behind me, I will ring out such music with this sword that the whole land will dance to it." He was indeed a leader of men. His words acted like a spell on the assemblage, and they broke once more into a tumult of acclamation.

Then he and the Lady Thora disappeared through the doorway, and the meeting broke up. As we left the room I asked D'Arcy why the tune had produced so extraordinary an effect on the soldiers.

"It is the death song of the First Lord of Argenteuil," he answered, "the great wizard and prophet of our country. It is only played at the death of a member of the Royal House."

But I remembered whom I had last heard play the melody, and wondered for whose ears John Silver had sent this ghostly message from the grave, and whether it were meant for Count Guy of Marmorel, for Charles the Red, for Sir Thule de Brie, or for the Lady Thora of Asturnia.

CHAPTER XXV

THE MARCH TO THE CAPITAL

DURING the next few days events moved rapidly. The day after Count Guy of Marmorel had declared his betrothal and cast off his allegiance to the king, the great courtyard of the castle was lined with glittering ranks of knights and men-at-arms, the gates were flung wide open, and my comrades filed in amid the blare of trumpets and loud cries of welcome. At their head rode Sir Thule de Brie, clad in complete armour, with his naked sword in his hand.

Count Guy of Marmorel rode out to meet him, and formal salutations passed between the two. I could not read the impassive masks of their faces, but there was a cold glint in their eyes which accorded ill with the surrounding enthusiasm. For the time, however, they had one great object in common, and I did not doubt that they would work together with a single purpose. But I scarcely dared to think what would happen when that purpose was once accomplished, and as I saw those two magnificent specimens of manhood facing each other in the flare of the torchlight, I felt that the time was not far off when Aturnia would be too small to hold the pair of them.

Then the ranks of soldiers opened, and the Princess herself came forward to welcome her faithful followers. Sir Thule de Brie flung himself from his horse and knelt to kiss her hand. I noticed, however, that he did not look

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her in the eyes, and that his face grew even more cold and hard as she spoke a few gracious words to him. Then one by one the captains and sailors filed past, doing their obeisance with genuine pleasure on their weather-beaten faces; and, to my surprise and joy, Captain Thorlassen was with them.

After that the men were dismissed, and were entertained royally by their new comrades, whom but a short time ago they had encountered in a terrible and bloody combat. I went among them, and, making my way to the side of Captain Thorlassen, grasped him by the hand, and overwhelmed him with a torrent of questions.

He told me how he had been left for dead in a pool of blood, and that he would have died if it had not been for some worthy citizens who came out by night with lanterns to see if any lived in that hecatomb of death. One of these, who had some skill in surgery, had sent a message to the forts for a doctor, and had given the wounded man every comfort and attention till he could be moved to the care of his own comrades.

He told me further how they had thought us dead; how they had failed to find a satisfactory plan of campaign; how their hearts had failed them, and they had determined to fly before the ice closed them in; how the stores had all been moved to the forts on some pretext or other; how the ships had then been burnt by a few brave and desperate men, headed by Sir Thule de Brie; how they had resolved to kill their betrayer, and been shamed by the things he said to them; and how Count Guy had opened negotiations for peace, and promised his assistance.

The day was given up to rejoicing, and the men returned to the forts. Sir Thule de Brie, however, remained in the castle, and sat far into the night with Count Guy of Marmorel, and the four chief leaders of the army.

The next day the call to arms began. Count Guy had

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laid his plans well, and surely. The knights in command of the 9,000 troops quartered in the town had been thoroughly sounded as to their views before the Count openly declared himself. The men responded as eagerly as their fellows in the castle had done, though that night a dozen knights and their squires left Sancta Maria under cover of the darkness, and spurred their horses in hot haste to the capital, each of them eager to be first with the news.

It was quite evident that Count Guy was going to adopt no Fabian policy of war. From what I had gathered, he had assumed the king's immediate knowledge of the rebellion. Every plan was laid and every scheme of advance was thought out. For a week past provisions had been piled on great waggons, every minute detail of organisation mapped out, and the whole force held in readiness to move at an hour's notice. It had been given out that the Northern Province was in revolt, and that instant orders might arrive to march on the insurgents.

That very night the whole army was on the road. A sufficient force was left to defend the castle, and it was strengthened by twenty of our sailors armed with their rifles, one Maxim and one fifteen-pounder. All the rest of the guns and ammunition were destined for the king's entertainment at Avranches, if indeed he did not ask to hear the music before we reached his capital.

It was now the end of October, and the sea to within fifty yards of the shore was covered with one solid mass of ice, several feet in thickness. The natural warmth of the land doubtless kept a narrow boundary of clear water round the island.

The thermometer, which I once more had an opportunity of consulting, stood at 10° above zero. This was an extraordinary reading for the time of year in the high latitude, and I realised how it was that the Asturnians were able to support an existence round the North Pole

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itself. I afterwards found, as we marched northwards, that the ground in places was quite warm beneath the feet, and I laid my hand on one or two rocks that were almost unpleasantly hot to the touch.

We gathered in the great square before the castle at 9 o'clock p.m. Greenwich mean time. It was an impressive sight. The flaring light of a thousand torches fell on a long line of spears, on the glittering armour and swords of the knights, on waving silk pennons, rich with armorial bearings, on the dull iron of Maxims and fifteen-pounders, and on the great sea of grim and eager faces. The two banners, newly wrought, of Count Guy of Marmorel and the Lady Thora, were planted side by side. The Count and Sir Thule de Brie rode hither and thither, shouting orders to the knights, who echoed them in turn to their men.

Then one by one our companies began to file off towards the town. There was a steady clank of steel and tramp of feet, swelling and swelling as the column grew. The torches appeared like a long line of sparks streaming out into the darkness. I fell into my appointed place close to the Princess, who, disdaining any kind of conveyance, rode her horse in the centre of the column.

My gilded costume was laid aside now, and I was clothed in the garb of an ordinary Englishman, but I wore a thin coat of chain mail beneath my fur-lined cloak. There were two revolvers in my belt, and a bandoleer of cartridges slung across my shoulders. We swung through the town, past closed doors and shuttered windows, with never a voice to wish us luck, or a hand to wave us farewell. The prudent townspeople were resolved not to commit themselves to any appearance of partizanship in the coming war until they saw which way the wind blew. And so we passed through dark and silent streets, till we emerged upon the sloping road which led towards the north.

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For five hours we never drew rein, proceeding at a uniform pace of about three miles an hour. Then we struck camp for the night. Before I turned in I stood with Captain Thorlassen on a spur of rock and looked across the country. We were still on the top of a range of boulder-strewn hills. The darkness was dotted with our fires, and far away in the distance we could see a faint red glow which betrayed the positions of our outposts.

The moon rose above the horizon, and the whole scene was bathed in a silvery light. A few miles away to the left the dark scenery bounded a vast plain of white. It was the Great Frozen Sea, and as I looked across it, I recalled how we had gazed over its surface from the other side, little thinking that it would ever open a pathway for us. Then we looked due north, and, far away in the distance, behind the range of mountains, the heavens glowed with a veritable sea of lights, and I guessed that there lay the destination of our army—Avranches, the impregnable capital of Asturnia. I reminded Thorlassen of the day I called on him in his room, and beside our fire we talked of many things far into the night. Then we turned in to rest, and I did not wake till the noise of a trumpet roused me from my sleep.

The next day we continued our march, and did not halt until noon. We were now on the brink of a steep hill sloping down to the shores of a lake, which was walled in on either side with cliffs of black rock. The Princess told me that this was the very lake of Nitril where her father's army had made a last stand against the insurgents; and where the Lord of Argenteuil and Sir Thule de Brie had climbed over a tall heap of slain to reach their horses, and fly to save her.

A faint haze hung over the water, and as I rode down the steep hill, it once again struck me that I had looked on such a scene before, only on the previous occasion it had been white and pale in the moonlight, and the silent

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shores had been strewn with the wreckage of battle, with broken weapons, torn standards, and great heaps of dead and dying. Whereas now the water flashed and sparkled with the reflection of a hundred fires, and the rocks rang and echoed with the advance of an army in the full pride of strength.

CHAPTER XXVI

BY THE LAKE OF NITRIL

OUR column streamed down the incline like some long snake of glittering steel. We were now moving in extended order, and the scouts were more numerous and farther ahead. If ever there was a place fashioned for an attack, it was this. The shore along which the road ran was scarcely two hundred feet in width, bounded on one side by the lake and on the other by a precipitous wall of rock. It was, so I learnt, the only road between Sancta Maria and the capital—on the other side of the lake the waters were deep against the rock itself—and I was not surprised to hear that it had been the scene of the fiercest and most decisive battles in the history of Asturnia.

I had a few words with Sir Thule de Brie, as he rode to the front of the column to make some disposition of the knights, and he himself told me that it was very unlikely that we should emerge on the heights above Avranches without a skirmish. He quickly arranged for the protection of the Princess, and rode on.

He was not mistaken in his estimate of the king's intentions. Before we had traversed half the length of the lake there was the wild alarm of a trumpet in the distance; then the sound of running feet far ahead, the clank of steel on the rocky ground, cries and the clash of arms. Then a long shiver seemed to run through the whole column, as though it had been an iron rod struck against some hard substance. A second or two later came the

By the Lake of Nitril

shock of battle, and the front ranks were in the thick of it. The outposts had been driven in; arrows began to whistle through the air and clink against the rocks. I could see in the white light of the fires that a long column of men were pressing against us, and that a terrible hand-to-hand combat was in progress. Long swords rose and fell; spears were thrust backwards and forwards till they were red with blood. Gay pennons dipped, and rose again crimson. There were cries of "À Marmorel!" "The King!" "Asturnia!" "The Queen!" and the whole air was full of the tumult of battle.

Then Sir Thule de Brie came thundering down the side of the column on his great white horse, and I saw him fling himself into the thick of the fight, and heard the cry of "De Brie!" "De Brie!" and saw the enemy's ranks part and close again as he drove himself into them like a wedge.

A few moments later I saw a small party of our own men detach themselves from the main body, dash down to the shore of the lake, and wheel a gun into position so as to cover the enemy's flanks. Up to this time there had been no sound of firing. The fight had been too concentrated, and the mêlée too thick to fire with safety. But an opportunity had evidently afforded itself, and a moment later came the rattle of rifles, and the sharp report of the quick-firing guns.

I could not restrain myself any longer, I gave one look at the Princess, and saw that she was so hemmed in with a wall of men that no chance arrow could reach her; I spurred my horse to the breach and dashed forward to the front. An arrow struck me full in the chest, but snapped in two like a dead twig. The force of the blow surprised me; it sent me reeling back on my horse, and I was glad of the coat of mail Sir Thule de Brie had lent me. A moment later my horse came crashing to the ground; I was stunned for a minute or two; and, when I rose, I

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saw three arrows driven deep into his struggling body. I blew out his brains with my revolver, and made my way on foot across the pebbles which bordered the lake.

As I did so, I saw a steel-clad line of men and horses wheel out of the enemy's ranks, and thunder along the beach to the guns. The rifles spoke three times and the guns but once. Then our men died one by one at their posts. But before the remnants of the knights could return, Sir Thule de Brie and Count Guy of Marmorel had flung themselves upon their flanks, and were tearing their way into them like tigers into the midst of a pack of hounds. More knights came up on either side, and when I marked the scene of the conflict, at least eighty men were engaged in a terrible combat. It was, however, quite evident that we were outnumbered, and the king's followers were artfully retreating, step by step, so as to bring the contest within their own lines.

I caught a riderless horse, jumped on its back, and rode to within ten yards of the mêlée. It was no place for anyone but a knight in complete armour, and I was as useless as a child. Even the men-at-arms on either side forbore to fling themselves into that whirlpool of steel. The air sparkled with the flashing swords and axes. Shorn plumes floated away into the lake. The very ground was red with blood, and a little stream of it flowed down among the pebbles.

Then I saw that Count Guy of Marmorel had got separated from the others, and that at least half a dozen of his opponents lay between him and his followers. For a brief moment my heart was filled with a fierce joy, for it seemed as though the death song of John Silver had spoken the truth, and that he would never live to marry the Princess. But I quickly stifled the unworthy thought. Here, at any rate, was a man fighting for the woman he loved, and not a skulker, like myself, hanging on the outskirts of battle.

By the Lake of Nitril

Then suddenly, for some reason or other, our knights seemed to give way and fall back, and there was a clear space between them and those who surrounded Count Guy of Marmorel. The Lord of Sancta Maria was fighting alone, and never before had I seen a man fight as he did that day. Men and horses seemed to sink beneath his blows like corn cut down by a sickle. He was crimson from head to foot, and his horse's feet trampled in a pool of blood. I saw his horse fall, and noted that he sprang from its back before its body touched the ground. Not a man among the knights went out to help him. As a matter of fact, they had but left him for a few seconds, though the swift and terrible course of the combat made it seem as many minutes.

Then there rose a loud cry of "De Brie! A rescue!" "De Brie!" and Sir Thule flung himself and his horse against the ring of knights with such force that he bore two of them to the ground. Inch by inch he carved his way through them, beating them down with his axe, and trampling them underfoot, hacking and hewing like a madman. Then I saw him lean from his saddle, fling Count Guy of Marmorel across it, knock two men from their horses with two successive blows, and come galloping back to the rear of the mêlée.

It was all done with such strength and swiftness that no one had the courage or time to bar his way. Before a few seconds had passed, the whole line of battle was raging as fiercely as before.

Sir Thule de Brie placed Count Guy upon his feet close to where I stood, and the two men looked each other in the face. Their armour was battered and dented and red with blood. Count Guy's helmet was half shorn away, and Sir Thule de Brie's shield was reduced to a mere shapeless mass of steel.

"You have saved my life, Sir Thule," Count Guy said simply, "and perhaps the fate of this kingdom. I shall not forget you."

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"I would rather you forgot, Count Guy," the other answered. "I did not do it for the kingdom's sake, nor yet——"

"I will find a horse," Count Guy broke in sharply; "and again I say I will not forget you, and again I thank you," and turning abruptly on his heel, he went to find another horse. Sir Thule de Brie rode back into the fight, and as I sat my steed alone on the beach, I wondered why he had so effectually checked the fulfilment of his own desires.

In less than a quarter of an hour the tide of battle turned. By a subtle and well-timed movement, four Maxims and two guns were trained on the king's force, and guarded by a strong body of knights and spearmen. The effect of the fire was terrific, and we literally ploughed a path for our column through the enemy's ranks. Before an hour had passed they broke and fled.

Then, one by one, the lights died out upon the hills, and there was darkness.

CHAPTER XXVII

AVRANCHES.

THERE was much to be thought of before we struck camp that night. Half of our force pursued the flying enemy, and driving them out of the Nitril valley, established themselves in a strong position on the rising ground beyond the lake. Here they constructed rude walls of boulders, and emplaced the guns under the direction of Captain Thorlassen. The remainder of us saw to the wounded and buried the dead. Among the latter were twenty-three of our own men and nineteen knights. Both sides had suffered severely in the contest, and as we searched the long dark shore and white road with our torches we found them thickly strewn with bodies. Some of these were even in the water, and one or two lay with their hands gripping at each other's throats.

When our task was ended, we proceeded on our way, emerged from the great rock-enclosed hollow, and rejoined our companions on the further hills. It was like coming into the fresh air from a room of sickness to stand on the hills once more, and leave that dark pit of water behind us.

We passed an undisturbed night, and when the tall pillars of flame once more shot up from the earth and flooded the surrounding country with light, we started our final day's march for the capital. Sir Thule de Brie told us that the last barrier of hills lay before us, and that he did not expect any more opposition until we reached

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the walls of the city itself. As far as I could judge from the distance we had travelled, and the observations I made that night by the stars, we were within a few miles of the Pole itself, and if that was the case, the goal of our original mission was in all probability within the very walls of the capital. How surprised the savants and explorers of Europe would have been to know that the busy feet of men trod daily past the place which was deemed to be either the open sea or a desolate expanse of snow-covered ice.

We toiled up the range of hills before us, and they were more rugged and precipitous than any I had yet seen in the country. Their lower slopes, indeed, were fertile and cultivated, but their summits were great heaps of rock, divided by long gaps into different spurs and eminences. The road itself was in excellent order, but ran up and down like a switchback, making the advance of an army, with all its impedimenta of guns and waggons, a slow and laborious business. Traces of those who had fled before us were abundant; the drops and splashes of blood upon the stones, the broken lances, the pieces of heavy armour flung recklessly to one side, and here and there the bodies of dead and dying men, told us how terribly we had dealt with our adversaries, and how swift and anxious had been their flight.

After four hours of ascent and descent, along a path which took us higher after every dip and rise, the front of the column began to slowly climb a long slope, that stood out against the sky, and then began to disappear from view. A few minutes later I reached the summit myself, and a wonderful sight spread itself out before my eyes.

Three miles away and six hundred feet beneath us lay the great city of Avranches. Not indeed seen, as a fair city should be for the first time, in golden sunlight, or with its walls and towers silvered by the moon, but yet so

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wonderfully illuminated that it seemed like some fair palace from the Arabian Nights.

It was indeed a fitting home for the king of a country that had been plunged in civil war for nearly eight centuries. It was built in the fork of a broad river, which sprung from a hundred streams in the hills. The valley itself was like a deep basin, six miles in diameter, and entirely surrounded with hills. To the east it narrowed and sloped up steeply to the mountains. To the west the river had cut itself a deep and narrow ravine through a great wall of rock, and poured through this to a long plain which bordered on the Frozen Sea.

The walls which surrounded the town seemed nearly a hundred feet in height, and rose sheer from the waters of the river. Every eighty yards or so they jutted out into escarpments and flanking towers, and even at this distance I could see that they were pierced with countless casements and loopholes. Within lay the houses of the city, divided into concentric circles by line after line of walls and towers, and in the centre of all, on a rocky eminence, lay a great castle, long and low built, like some animal crouching to spring.

The whole city blazed with tall columns of blue-white flame, and coruscated with thousands of smaller lights. From the top of the hill we could see with a telescope black specks moving to and fro in the glare, and could catch the glint and flash of steel.

As fortune would have it, the whole column halted a few seconds after I had caught my first glimpse of the town, and I was enabled to survey the whole scene with silent admiration. Never was a place so well adapted and fortified to hold an insecure throne. For the days of modern artillery, it was too near the commanding hills, but I estimated that it was just out of range of the strongest mangonel. Plentifully stocked with provisions it would be almost impregnable.

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We halted for an hour, and Count Guy of Marmorel and Sir Thule de Brie rode round and round the columns deep in consultation. Then Captain Thorlassen was summoned, and a few minutes later I saw two fifteen-pounders being brought into position, and men carrying cartridges from the waggons. We were going to try the range of our artillery.

Then there was a report, and the eyes of all were fixed on the town. The shell burst a hundred yards short of the castle, and we could see the smoke of it drifting across one of the great fires, and men running hither and thither in confusion. The gunners sighted the weapon afresh, and the next shot struck one of the towers of the castle. That was sufficient. We could not afford to throw away more cartridges on experiments. Ammunition was none too plentiful, and we had to reserve it for large bodies of men, where every shot would account for at least twenty dead.

After a brief discussion between the leaders of the expedition, it was resolved to make the place in which we had halted the base of our future operations. It commanded the city, and also the road to Sancta Maria. There was a spring close by, and our foraging parties, covered by modern artillery, held practically the whole valley at their mercy.

Before evening came, and the great fires died out along the valley and hills, we had marked out the site of our encampment. It was chosen with skill on a flat tableland, with precipitous sides; and one of the great fires burned in the midst.

All night long large bodies of men toiled incessantly, bearing boulders and baskets of earth, and when the fires once more flashed out across the country, a rampart three feet high had grown up all round the encampment; and before darkness came again it had raised itself as high as a tall man's head, and our guns bristled out through

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the entrenchments, like watch-dogs with open jaws. It was clear to me that Count Guy meditated a long siege.

Subsequent consultation with Sir Thule de Brie showed that this was the policy they had decided on. Count Guy's haste to leave Sancta Maria had been justified. We had struck a blow before the enemy had had time to fortify the road to the capital, and had struck the blow home. Now that we had reached the heights overhanging the town and valley, haste was unnecessary, and probably inexpedient. We could watch the town from our lofty eminence, sweep down on foraging parties, hold the place in a state of siege, and bide our time.

For three days we waited, and no sign came from the city beneath us. We fired an occasional shot to remind the inhabitants that we were still close enough to them to make ourselves unpleasant, collected all the provisions we could from small villages and hamlets, and watched the town day and night.

Then on the third day we saw a gate open in the walls nearest to us, and a small procession file across the narrow bridge which crossed the river. In an instant the guns were turned upon it, and if Sir Thule de Brie had not come up to the ramparts, the cavalcade would have had a very sorry advance across the plain.

He looked through Captain Thorlassen's telescope, and abruptly told the men to wait.

"A herald," he said to me. "The king might have saved himself the trouble. He is not likely to bring a message of conciliation."

An hour later the herald himself arrived, a tall, broad-shouldered man with fair hair and a long beard. He was clad in armour, covered with a gorgeous surtout of silk, emblazoned with the royal arms. He bore no weapon that I could see, though he may have had one concealed about his person. In front of him rode two knights with

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white pennons fluttering from their lances, and behind him six squires, bearing his lance, a shield, sword, and various emblems appertaining to his office.

He rode with quiet dignity up the only approach to our camp, and Count Guy of Marmorel and Sir Thule de Brie, surrounded by all their knights, received him in full sight of the whole army. He approached Count Guy, and bowing coldly, handed him a parchment scroll. The latter ran his eye over it and scowled.

"I will read your message to my knights, Sir Herald," he said sharply. "They will answer you," and he whispered a few words to a squire at his side.

"The message is to Count Guy of Marmorel," said the herald abruptly.

"The voice of Count Guy of Marmorel is the voice of his followers," replied the Count. "The answer shall come from them. Knights and men-at-arms, this is the message of our lord the king."

"To Count Guy of Marmorel, sorrowful greeting. Though the heart is grieved that so distinguished a subject has, in a fit of temporary madness, thought fit to take arms against his master, and league himself with the enemies of his country, yet bearing in mind his great services in the past, and a loyal devotion, which we had deemed proof against the sorceries of a woman's eyes, we, of our clemency, are willing to grant a free pardon to him and all men of this kingdom, if the woman calling herself Princess Thora of Asturnia, and her alien followers, are delivered into our hands.' That is the message, my knights and soldiers. What answer have you to make to so fair a proposition?"

The knights were contemptuously silent, but the men-at-arms laughed with anger and derision.

"You have your answer, Sir Herald."

"I do not take it from churls. I came to Count Guy of Marmorel, and he must answer me."

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"Look round you, then," cried Count Guy of Marmorel, "and see what answer I am able to give you."

The herald glanced beyond the lines of knights, and my own eyes followed his looks. Every gun and Maxim had been swung round from its embrasure, and was turned to a common centre—point-blank on the herald, Count Guy, his knights, and all the mass of common soldiers. Beside each piece of artillery stood a knot of our sailors, alert for action. They could have blown the whole crowd of us into a heap of mangled flesh in five minutes. "Shall we bind them now, Sir Herald," the Count continued, "and deliver them into your hands, or shall we await their consent?"

"I do not understand you, Count Guy," the herald answered haughtily. "What is this foolery? Have you no plain answer to a plain question?"

"It is certain that you do not understand," the knight said drily. "But I will make things clear to you. You do not understand that we are in the power of these men, and that if I were to agree to the proposition of your king, they would sweep you and me and every living soul that stands about us into a bloody heap of corpses, and spatter our dead bodies on the rock as men crush insects with their hands."

"I have heard of these weapons, Count Guy," he answered coldly, "and it may be as you say. Am I to understand that your answer is 'No'?"

"That most certainly must be my answer. It grieves me to give it, but it is enforced on me."

"And your answer might have been different, if you had been your own master?" The herald said, with a touch of sarcasm in his voice.

"It might have been different," Count Guy replied grimly, "under different circumstances."

The herald smiled. "Then I will deliver you this message from the king. To you, Count Guy, to you, Sir

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Thule de Brie, and to you, men of Asturnia. The king will give your possessions to those who have served him loyally, and will decorate the walls of his city with your bodies before another month has passed."

Sir Thule de Brie moved forward. "Tell your king from me," he answered, "that before a month has passed he will have no walls to decorate, and that those who have served him loyally will be where earthly possessions will interest them but little."

The herald wheeled his horse round sharply, and followed by his escort, rode swiftly across the rocky tableland, and disappeared from view. When he had gone, Count Guy of Marmorel broke into a hearty laugh.

"What think you of that, my master?" he said. "Was it not a jest? Methinks he will carry back a wholesome fear of the strange weapons in his mind, and perchance some false hopes in his heart."

"I would rather you had spoken your mind plainly," replied Sir Thule de Brie. "But I took the liberty of speaking it for you."

"Sir Thule de Brie," he answered quietly, "you are a brave man, but not versed in the craft which makes the fortunes of a leader. I have led the king to suppose that I am in your power, and that our force is divided in opinion. He will act accordingly, and so play into our hands." And with these words he rode back to his tent, while Sir Thule de Brie watched him with a faint smile upon his face.

* * * * *

Two months passed, and we were still perched upon the top of the hills, waiting for an opportunity to strike at the city beneath us. The cold grew more intense, and night and day a hundred great fires blazed in our camp, and the spring of water was circled with flames to keep it from freezing. It was weary work, and I began to

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think that it might last for years. I was, indeed, informed that Count Guy had relied on a revolt in the city itself, and had hoped that the gates would have been opened from within. But in this he had been disappointed. The place was watched day and night through a large telescope, and there had not been the slightest sign of an unusual disturbance.

We were not, however, idle during this period of waiting. Day after day two thousand of our men toiled in the valley below, and drove long entrenchments and parallels across the plain, till they were within bowshot of the city itself. The enemy made several sorties to stop the work, but a couple of Maxims entrenched behind the higher earthworks, and a few shells from our fifteen-pounders on the hill, turned the scale in our favour, and only on two occasions did they fight our men hand to hand.

As each day passed, Count Guy of Marmorel's face grew more stern and dark, and I think, indeed, he spent very little time by the side of the Princess. He passed hour after hour looking through some embrasure motionless and deep in thought, occasionally studying a complete and accurate plan of the city, but addressing no one, and curtly answering any who came to him on business connected with the army. And every evening he and Sir Thule de Brie and his chief knights would meet in consultation and discuss new schemes to take the capital.

It was now evident that we could not effectually blockade the city. Our force was too small, and would have been most dangerously weakened if we had divided it. It would have been equally foolhardy to attempt to storm the place, and vacate an impregnable position. There were at least 15,000 troops within the walls, and a third of that number could have held them against us. We lived in hope that the enemy would leave their stronghold and give battle to us on the plain, but no device or ruse on our part could draw them out to a pitched battle. We

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continuously sent out small parties of men in the hope that some attempt would be made to cut them off, but the king, who was the first swordsman in the kingdom, knew the strength of his position, and restrained himself from meeting us in open fight. The old Asturnian proverb was a true one: "Who holds Avranches is king of Asturnia."

It must not be supposed that Count Guy was idly waiting his chance, and taking no further steps to bring the tottering throne of King Charles the Red to its fall. East and west and south and north his messengers were stirring up rebellion. They were enthusiastically received by the common people; but in most cases the knights and their followers refused to commit themselves, and in one or two instances hung the envoy to the nearest tree. The death roll of Count Guy's secret service was a long one. No less than thirty-five men had made their way into the city itself, to approach those knights who were known to be disaffected to the king, but not a man returned, nor was there any sign that the message had been delivered. The only gleam of hope came from the Northern Province. The chief city, St. Briec, had openly declared for the Princess Thora, and a force of five thousand men was slowly making its way through the great forests to our assistance.

On January 4th, the thermometer had fallen to 3°, though in the camp itself, and near the great fires, it was not unpleasantly cold. I shall remember that day well, for after a long conflict in my mind, I myself decided the fate of Avranches.

It was nearly seven o'clock, and in a few minutes the whole land would be plunged in darkness. I stood alone by one of the embrasures, and, leaning upon a fifteen-pounder, gazed idly on the glittering town. My thoughts were not of the happiest, and I knew that however long the siege might be, it would be only a respite for me. When that proud city fell, the Princess would be crowned

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Queen of Asturnia, and become the bride of Count Guy of Marmorel.

And as I gazed, the flaring lights reflected on the frost-bound river began to fascinate me; and it seemed to my imagination that the city was held fast in the coils of a long white snake. I followed the silvery line to where it disappeared in a black wall of rock, and I could not get the idea out of my head that the tall mass of walls and towers and blazing lights was being strangled in the grip of that thin white reptile. Then, as I looked, a sudden thought struck me, and starting to an upright position, I looked sharply round the valley, and I felt a cold chill at my heart, for the horror of the thing I had imagined was inconceivable.

The great fires died out, but for a whole hour I stood looking on the smaller lights that twinkled in the city. I was fighting a great struggle with myself. So long as Avranches held its own, the Princess Thora would be free, and yet so long would the desire of her heart remain unaccomplished. Love and jealousy and hatred of Count Guy of Marmorel warred fiercely with my wish to give her the greatest happiness of all—the crown of her kingdom. But in the end my better self conquered. She had of her own free will chosen her part, knowing the price she had to pay. It was not for me, her most loving subject, to do aught but further her wishes. I left the battlement, and made my way to the tent of Count Guy of Marmorel, feeling that I was about to sign the death warrant of my own happiness, and that I carried the doom of a great city in my hands.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE GORGE OF THE PASQUERELLE

WHEN I had gained admission to Count Guy's tent through a double line of soldiers, I found myself in the presence of the whole council of war.

Count Guy and Sir Thule de Brie sat at each end of a long oaken table, and at either side of them were Captain Thorlassen, the Lord of Marmontier, Sir Hugh de la Perche, Sir Gascon de Varaville, and Lord Fulk of Brabançon. A large oil-lamp flared from the centre pole of the tent, and the table was strewn with parchment and maps of the city and surrounding country. It was evident that there had been a heated discussion on some matter. There was a dark flush on Count Guy's face, and Sir Thule de Brie's eyebrows were knitted ominously together. The others looked sullen and discontented, as though they were sick of the whole business. It was apparent that my entrance was hailed as a relief from a somewhat awkward situation, and Captain Thorlassen smiled at me.

"Well, sir," said Count Guy sharply, "I trust your news warrants this interruption of our business."

"It does, Count Guy of Marmorel," I answered, "if you are still of a mind to capture Avranches, and place the Princess Thora on the throne of Aturnia." Lord Fulk of Brabançon laughed and looked meaningly at Sir Hugh de la Perche, who frowned and fingered one of the maps on the table. I guessed that my word had gone

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home, and that one, at least, of those present had been advocating the abandonment of the siege.

"Proceed," Sir Thule de Brie said quietly. "We are of one mind in this matter, but Charles the Red, of Asturnia, thinks differently, and his opinion seems likely to prevail."

"I have that to lay before you, my lords," I continued, "which may overrule the king's voice in this matter, and leave you alone to decide the fate of Avranches."

Sir Thule motioned me to a seat at the table, and casting my eyes over the various plans, I selected one which showed the whole valley of the Pasquerelle, and pulled it towards me.

"Kindly state your business," Count Guy said sharply. "If there is anything in what you have to say."

I took the map, and smoothing it out before me, went straight to the point.

"I understand," I said, "that the river Pasquerelle enters the valley down a long slope of hills, and leaves it through a single opening in a sheer wall of rock."

"That is so," answered Sir Thule de Brie.

"I also understand that the circular basin in which the city of Avranches lies is about six miles in diameter, and that there is no opening in the circle of hills except the ravine I have mentioned, or, at any rate, no opening until the ground has risen at least two hundred feet above the level of the sea."

"You are correct," Count Guy said quickly, with a gleam of intelligence in his dark eyes.

"The river," I continued, "is, I believe, a large one. Could anyone give me some idea of its width and depth?"

"It is about one hundred feet in width, and forty feet in depth where it crosses the plain," answered Count Guy. "Nearer the ravine it narrows and deepens. It is fed by all the streams in these hills, and is itself the conjunction of the only three rivers in the country."

"Good," I replied. "Well, suppose it were possible to

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effectually close the ravine so that no water could pass through it, or, at any rate, so that only a small portion of the river could find an outlet. What would be the result?"

"The valley would in time be flooded," said Lord Fulk of Brabançon, with a laugh, "and Avranches would be more impregnable than before. We cannot swim to the walls with our swords in our teeth."

"And yet," I answered slowly, giving effect to every word, "if the flood continued to rise, the water would reach the top of the walls themselves; and if it still continued, the whole city would lie beneath the surface of a great lake."

For a few seconds no one spoke. The contemplation of so gigantic a catastrophe as the overwhelming of a whole city in one watery grave, was too tremendous, even for these stern warriors. They were accustomed to see hundreds slaughtered in the heat of battle. But this thing was different—a deed calmly calculated and carried out in cold blood, and a wiping-out of a tenth of the nation.

Then Count Guy laughed loudly, and rose to his feet with an exultant look on his face. "By my faith, sir," he cried, "for a man of peace, you have pretty ideas of life and death."

"I have only one idea in my mind," I replied angrily, "and that is to set the Princess Thora on the throne of Asturnia. For myself, I would not see a man die either for or against her, if it could be avoided. But where she is concerned, neither my own life, nor those of her enemies, nor even yours, Count Guy of Marmorel, are aught but straws in the wind."

"You are right," said Sir Thule de Brie; "and it is possible that by this plan many lives may be saved. The king may capitulate before the water is up to his ankles."

"I only jested," Count Guy said hastily; "I know that

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you do not seek your own advantage in this matter," and he looked at me with so much meaning in his eyes that I flushed and bit my lips with shame.

"Is it possible to fill up the ravine in less than a year?" asked Sir Hugh de la Perche. "The rock is hard as steel. There is no earth near the summit of the gorge."

"I will undertake to do it in two weeks," I replied, "with five hundred men. We have powers at our disposal that you know little of, Sir Hugh. We could send half of one of those hills toppling into the valley, if we wished to do so."

Count Guy smiled grimly. He remembered how the great gates of his castle had been blown in like bits of paper.

"You have not seen the ravine yet," said Captain Thorlassen. "I would not promise to do it in so short a time. How long would the valley take to fill?"

I took out a piece of paper and a pencil, and made some rough and hurried calculations.

"The water should be one hundred feet deep in three months," I replied. "Of course, this is only an estimate. I have no exact measurements; I don't know the rate at which the stream runs, nor can I yet tell how much water will escape."

"The water will freeze, of course," said Sir Thule de Brie, "and it will be possible for our troops to advance over the ice. It will be about two feet thick."

"I had that in my mind, Sir Thule de Brie," I answered. "The barrier should be raised to such a height as to bring the water within a foot of the top of the walls. It will not be hard to make the calculation with our instruments. If the king refuses to give in, we can raise it higher. If he capitulates, his troops can leave the city and deliver up their arms under the shadow of our guns."

"And when we are in possession of the city?" someone asked.

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"We can blast the barrier to pieces, let the water out of the valley, and remain with the key of Asturnia in our hands."

"A well-thought-out plan," said Count Guy of Marmorel, holding out his hand to me. "What say you, my lords and knights. Is not this gentleman deserving of our thanks?"

"Aye, aye," they cried one by one, rising and pressing round me to grasp my hand. I responded but coldly to the warmth of their enthusiasm.

"You owe me no thanks," I said, moving towards the door, "we all have the same interests at stake and—and at heart."

"When Avranches falls," said Count Guy, his great form towering over me like a shadow, "you shall not be forgotten; and when the Princess is crowned Queen of Asturnia, you shall have your reward."

I looked him straight in the eyes and, turning sharply on my heel without a word, left the room. I had done a night's work that the whole world could not compensate me for. Perchance, too, the deaths of ten thousand fellow-men would be laid at the door of my soul.

The next day the great dam was begun. We picked out two hundred of our sailors and three hundred Asturnians for the work in hand. All the men were fully armed, and a long line of waggons followed us laden with food, tents, pickaxes, crowbars, 1,000 lbs. of blasting gelatine, and all the apparatus and instruments necessary for firing the charges and obtaining the level of the top of the town walls. We had resolved to save time by camping on the spot. The ravine was only one and a half miles from our guns, and was practically inaccessible from the valley side without a considerable detour. It was, moreover, very unlikely that the king's forces would leave the town, as we had failed to draw them out on so many

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previous occasions. By way of further precaution, however, we took with us a fifteen-pounder and two Maxims. The moon was favourable for our enterprise. It hung above the horizon for ten days and nights like a great electric arc lamp, and gave us so much light that it was easy to read small print by it. We divided ourselves into three shifts, and were able to work every hour out of the twenty-four.

The ravine itself was well worth a visit from the artistic standpoint, and would have been a show place for tourists if it had been in Switzerland.

The walls were at least two hundred feet in height, and the space between them not more than twenty feet in width. When I first looked over the edge there was nothing to be seen but a black gulf from which ascended the roar of waters and a faint mist of spray. But we had brought a searchlight with us, and when its rays had pierced the darkness, we saw near the entrance a cauldron of boiling foam, and farther down a long lane of swift black water flecked with white froth; and further still a veritable inferno of jagged rocks and seething whirlpools. The walls of the gorge were glittering with frozen spray, and from every projection in the rock hung gigantic icicles. The water itself was descending, as far as I could judge, about one in twenty, and it was almost impossible for the surface to freeze; but every now and then a great block of ice, detached from the upper part of the river, would whizz down the ravine, and splinter itself against the sides into a thousand fragments.

Such was the place we had to work in. I had spoken glibly enough in the tent about making a dam, but as I looked into that awful hell of ice and water, I realised that the credit of the work would not rest with him who planned the scheme, but with those who dared to carry it out. Small wonder that such a task had never been attempted in the previous history of the kingdom. I doubt if it

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could possibly have been accomplished without modern explosives.

We selected the lower part of the gorge for our work. In the first place, it was hidden from the town of Avranches by the rising ground; and in the second, the water was more shallow and broken up with rocks, and there would be less chance of the falling débris being carried away.

We were fortunate in having with us several men with a practical experience of rock blasting. Under their supervision we bridged the gorge with four great baulks of timber, and letting down half a dozen cradles on either side, began to bore a hundred holes in the solid rock. Each hole was twenty-five inches in depth, and contained a two-pound charge of blasting gelatine. They were all connected by wires to an electrical firing apparatus placed a hundred yards away from the edge of the gorge. Although we were equipped with diamond rock drills the work occupied ten days. Hawkins, who had worked on some of the hardest quartz reefs in the world, said that he had never struck any formation of such metallic hardness.

I should hardly like to say what the men suffered from the cold of that icy and foam-spattered gorge. It was no uncommon thing for us to pull up a man in a half-fainting condition and thaw him to life before a roaring fire. We watched the men carefully under the search-light, and a signal cord hung to the side of every one of them, but in spite of all precautions four of them fell senseless into the rushing water below, and died as surely for their Queen as though they had perished in the front of battle.

The Asturnians were of no use to us in this work. Time was too short to teach them the intricacies of modern machinery and engineering. We employed half of them in guarding the camp and the other half in hewing

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down hundreds of stunted fir trees, and piling them up thirty yards from the brink of the precipice.

The work was finished without interruption from the king's forces; and it is doubtful if he had any knowledge of what we were doing. On January 15th the last hole was bored, and the last connection was made, and four hundred men stood ready with trees and brushwood on their shoulders to assist in the formation of the dam.

I fired the charge myself. There was a terrific concussion, a long roar, and we saw the edges of the gorge crumble away in a cloud of dust and smoke. We rushed to the brink of the gulf, fixed the searchlight, and saw a great mass of débris piled up the sides of the chasm twenty feet above the water. Every man hurled his burden of trees or bush into the river, and we could see them being forced and tangled into the jagged lumps of stone, till they seemed to bind the whole fabric with a network of wood. The work had been well done. The face of either cliff to a depth of three feet and a length of ten yards had been precipitated into the ravine. The river boiled against this new obstacle with fury, and some of it forced its way through the crevices of the rocks; but for a few minutes the torrent below the dam dwindled away into a babbling brook, and the water on the other side was rising inch by inch. I held a brief consultation with Captain Thorlassen, and we made a series of accurate measurements and observations. As we did so, we noticed that the water suddenly ceased to rise in any perceptible degree. It had evidently reached the level of the entrance of the gorge, and had the whole great plain in which to expand itself.

As the result of our observations, we set the men to work again, and five days later, two more huge slices were cut off the rocky walls, and hurled on to the dam. And we had to repeat this operation three times to bring the obstruction up to the requisite height and breadth.

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When we had finished, there was not an ounce of explosive left in our camp, and the top of the gorge had widened to over forty feet. We completed the work at the end of January, and as we returned to the camp we saw an ice-covered lake three hundred acres in extent spreading out from the mouth of the gorge, and grinding its broken edges against the hills on either side.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE LAST BATTLE

DAY by day the icy surface of the lake broadened and crept nearer to Avranches, and day by day we watched it from the camp, as men watch their dogs creep on some trembling prey. On February 10th the whole valley was a couple of feet under water, and we could see the inhabitants of the town blocking up the gateways of the outer wall, and running hither and thither in indescribable confusion.

A few days later the lower part of the town was flooded. The enormous weight of the water had forced in some ill-constructed barrier, and pouring through the streets and houses a yard in depth, had driven the inhabitants out of their homes to the higher ground. A gang of soldiers, however, managed to stop up the gap, and as the water froze, the wretched people returned, walking on the ice, and apparently endeavouring to drag out some kind of existence in the upper parts of their houses. Before the end of February the water was twenty feet deep outside the walls; the loopholes and windows were stopped up in vain, and the whole of the town between the first and second ring of fortifications was uninhabitable. Still no word came from the king, and his flag floated as proudly as ever from the highest tower of the castle.

But his soldiers and his people were not disposed to look upon the advancing danger with so much equanimity. The whole surface was frozen hard, except at the edges, where the rising water broke the ice and left a nar-

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row moat about the castle walls and the shores of the lake. The risk of crossing this channel of small floes and freezing water was great, but many risked it. Scarcely an hour of the night passed in which we did not see small black figures hurrying away across the frozen plain, or did not hear the shrieks and cries of drowning men.

One night five hundred soldiers of the king's own guard crossed the ice to our camp and gave themselves into our hands. They came with a pitiable story on their lips. Half the city was under water. The whole of the population and the soldiers were crowded together within the last line of ramparts. Food was running short, and the king was driving the wretched citizens from the walls, to perish or escape as best they could. Many of them, fearing to leave the city, were huddled together upon the ice in the lower town, without food or light or warmth. The army itself was fast merging into a disorderly rabble without guidance or discipline. Some were for escaping to the hills and fortifying Brabançon; some were for meeting Count Guy in open fight, and deciding the issue on a single cast of the die; some were for surrender; some had vowed to hold the castle till the water washed their dead bodies from the walls. Not a day passed without strife and bloodshed. The place was a hell of indecision and tumult. Yet over all stood the king, calm as the ice itself, favouring no policy, and with his own resolutions locked in his crafty brain. With two thousand picked men, he kept himself within the walls of his great castle, and brooded over the ill-fated town like a vulture. Charles the Red was loved by no man, but feared by all. Of enormous physical strength, and reputed to be more skilful in the use of the sword than any man in Asturnia, he held the whole of the place in a state of terror and despair. His presence was the only check on open rebellion.

But we were destined to learn his policy within the

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next few days. Like many statesmen of our own European countries, he knew the surest remedy for internal disorder. The din and fury of battle have always been powerful enough to drown the feuds and dissensions of parties. Men have little time to argue with their neighbours when they are led out against a common foe. It is those who wait inactive for the bullet and the steel who are wont to discuss how best to meet them. On the night of the first of March, Charles the Red, as he was called from the flaming colour of his beard, played for high stakes and lost them.

It was a dark night, for the moon was not yet above the horizon. The stars only showed a dim white sea beneath us, and in the distance a dark island twinkling with a few yellow flames. The only searchlight we had brought with us from Sancta Maria was unfortunately out of order. It had been of considerable assistance in watching the movements of the enemy by night. We had, however, no fear of the darkness. Every sound could be heard in the stillness, and anything in the nature of a surprise was an impossibility.

I did not go to bed that night until after twelve o'clock. And I had scarcely closed my eyes when I was roused by the cry of the sentry. I listened for a minute and heard the sound of footsteps and voices, and then the clank of arms, and the stir and movement of the whole camp. I flung on my clothes and rushed to the battlements. They were lined with men peering into the darkness across the valley.

"Hark," cried someone, and all those near me were silent. I listened. I heard sounds in the distance, the continual clank of steel, the cracking and shivering of ice, and now and then a faint splash and the voice of a man. Then, listening further, I heard sounds to the right and left of us along the hills, very distant and very faint, but to the man who waits for his enemy, the loud signal of his approach. The most unlikely thing in the world had hap-

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pened. We were going to be attacked in our almost impregnable position, and the king was going to hazard his throne on the result.

Men moved swiftly to their posts; orders were hurriedly given and obeyed. Troops were arranged, guns trained, ammunition served out, swords drawn, bows strung, and the whole camp was moving like a hive of bees. There was plenty of time, for the sounds were yet faint in the distance, but it is better to wait than to be surprised. We were determined to be ready when the hour came.

But we had reckoned without our host. While orders were still being shouted, and men still hurrying to and fro, there came a rattling sleet of arrows from the south. A moment later there was a roar of guns and a rattle of Maxims. Then there was a clash of steel, and men were fighting hand to hand. Charles the Red had indeed prepared a rare surprise for Count Guy of Marmorel. He had raised a large force of knights and soldiers, and had managed to throw them against us on the one side where we least expected an attack—the one that faced the road to Sancta Maria.

In less than twenty minutes great bodies of men dashed up from east and west, and shortly afterwards the storm broke from the north, and our camp was hemmed in on all sides with a ring of steel.

It is impossible for me to speak of that battle with the accuracy of a historian. In the darkness I saw nothing but the spitting flames of our guns, the occasional flash of a sword, and dark masses of men swaying to and fro in the starlight. I felt nothing but the rap, rap of arrows against my coat of chain mail, and the occasional lurch of a stricken man against my side. But my ears had no lack of sounds to fill them. The roar of artillery, the war cries of the knights, the clash of steel, the groans of the wounded, and the thud and crash of blows. It was a

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deafening pandemonium; but a man can only write of what he sees, and for ten minutes I saw little.

Then the moon rose above the mountains, and I could see that we were completely hemmed in by a great army of men, and that the enemy were breaking like waves over the walls and fighting their way within the very ramparts. I could see, too, that every time one of our guns spoke, a long furrow passed through the silvery surface of armour, and closed up again; while the Maxims literally cut down swathes of men, and flattened them to the earth as a tornado flattens a cornfield. The carnage was horrible. I know of nothing like it in modern war. Since we had been in the country our guns had been used more than once with great and terrible effect; but it was reserved for Charles the Red to teach us what hellish work modern artillery can do against great masses of men. I shall never forget that scene in the moonlight; the waves of steel-clad men rushing against the battlements, only to be hurled back and shattered into mangled heaps of flesh and blood; the splash of a warm rain on our very faces; the continuous shrieking of the wounded; and still through it all the hot sleet of arrows streaming from every point of the compass into our midst.

I had little to do, though now and again a few knights broke through the ring of death, cut down our gunners at their posts, and hewed their way to where the twin ensigns floated over the centre of the camp. But they never reached their goal. They had passed the guns, but cold steel was waiting for them, and they died like heroes. I killed two of them myself with my revolver, and the battle-axe of another would have beaten the life out of me if Sir Hugh de la Perche had not intervened his shield.

The whole affair did not last twenty minutes. No fight could have lasted longer under such conditions. It was mere butchery. The enemy broke and fled, leaving three-quarters of their number heaped round our camp in

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great piles of dead and dying, and the very mountain side was red with frozen blood. The victory was the work of our sailors. It was possible that without them the barricade would have been rushed in that sharp and sudden surprise from the south. They bore the brunt of the conflict, sticking to their guns till they fell in the forefront of the battle. Two hundred of them died that night, and when the fight was over there were five rounds left for each gun, and two rolls of cartridges for each Maxim. Before the last sound of the retreating army had died away, Count Guy knighted myself, Captain Thorlassen, and Captain Edwards with his own hand, and vowed that every one of our men should receive a house, land, and free maintenance by the state till the day of his death.

The enemy were not suffered to depart in peace. The whole long mountain-side was strewn with their dead. A large body of knights and spearmen and archers pursued the fugitives, cutting, stabbing, and shooting up to the very edge of the lake. Less than one thousand men reached the shore, and even then the ice was dyed with their blood. There were single combats on the slippery surface, and long after our men had retired the arrows of the archers found many a mark, and our rifles made a line of dead up to the very castle walls.

When morning came, and the long fires streamed once more up into the sky, the scene about our ramparts was so terrible that we decided to move our camp. We had no longer any need of fortifications, but I have learnt that it is impossible for a leader to be too careful. We resolved to entrench ourselves lower down the mountain, not more than a hundred feet above the edge of the water.

At noon the Princess Thora was led out on her horse through the heaps and lanes of dead. Count Guy and Sir Thule de Brie insisted on her being blindfolded, so that she saw nothing of that fearful sight. Her face was white as death, and tears streaming down her cheeks.

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These dead men were her subjects, and perhaps under different circumstances would have died in her defence. She could hear the hoofs of her steed striking the steel of their armour, and feel the stumble of its feet against their bodies. Poor child! she had indeed succeeded to an inheritance of blood.

CHAPTER XXX

THE FROZEN CITY

FOR three days our men toiled on that death-strewn height, and did their best to bury the dead, and note the names of the principal victims. Lords, knights, and common soldiers were all there, but no one found the body of the king himself or those of his two sons. Our work was not yet over, but the fate of the castle lay in our hands. The waters still continued to rise, and the crust of ice was breaking and toppling over the summit of the city walls. The whole of the town was flooded out, and apparently all the wretched inhabitants had made their escape into the surrounding country, save those who were too weak to move, and those who had perished in the attempt. We could see the frozen water glistening round the base of the very castle itself. But the king's flag still floated on the highest tower, and Avranches was not yet delivered into our hands.

Then the water suddenly ceased to creep up the mountain side, and we knew that the power of the dam had reached its limit. We had now to choose between increasing the height of the barrier and storming the castle by force of arms. We decided on the latter, as being the quickest means of attaining our end. It would have taken two more months to completely flood the king from his castle—if, indeed, he was still in it—and four more months to drain off the water from the plain. The undertaking was too gigantic for our purpose. It was

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like taking a fifteen-pounder to shoot a squirrel. We resolved to move our forces on the castle, blast the gate down with dynamite, and put an end to the war with a single decisive stroke.

On the night of March 1st, three hundred picked men made their way across the ice to the beleaguered city. They took with them a single gun, and all the remaining ammunition. Four of our sailors wheeled some large iron-sheathed boxes on small trolleys. These contained a hundred pounds of dynamite apiece, and a firing apparatus. The ice was firm and strong. Now that the water had ceased to rise, it had thickened considerably. It was very rough in parts, but it would have borne an army in close formation.

We advanced in a great semicircle, two miles in length, and a hundred yards in depth. Every man was twenty feet from his neighbour. The extended lines offered a difficult target to the enemy, and minimised the danger of breaking the ice, if there should happen to be any weak spots in it.

The moon was shining brightly above the hills, and it gave almost as much light as the artificial day. There was no question of a surprise. We were prepared to reduce the place by force, and hazard our lives in the doing of it. Every single survivor of our expedition who could walk had obtained permission to join in the attack. For two months I and Captain, or, as I must now call him, Sir Otto Thorlassen, had been engaged on a long series of observations with our most delicate instruments, and we had located the Pole within the castle walls. The true location, of course, depended on the exact measurements from the point of observation to the castle. But we had obtained this from fifty different sources, and had no reason to doubt their accuracy. The Asturnians are by no means ignorant in practical matters of this sort, and the maps of their country would do credit to an

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English ordnance surveyor. The result was made known to every sailor and captain in our little band, and their thoughts had been once more turned from the grim realities of war to that imaginary spot where a man can grasp all the lines of longitude with a single hand. And not one of them would have missed the chance of being first within the castle, for all the rewards and gold Count Guy could have offered them. They did not for the moment seek the glory of knocking away the last prop of Charles' kingdom, but the honour of being first at the North Pole.

I looked on that strange scene in the moonlight more with sorrow than with expectant pleasure. Of the thousand men who had sailed from London, a bare two hundred were moving across the ice to their final goal. Of these many limped, and not a few had but a single arm, while the number of gashed faces and bandaged heads bore witness to the fierce nature of a combat from which scarce a man had come out unscathed. More than one hundred men were unable to leave the camp. With wistful eyes and curses on their lips they watched their more fortunate comrades depart across the ice. The other six hundred odd were dead. Some had died in the long journey to the Frozen North and the first cruel winter, others had fallen victims to disease, but the great majority had perished on the field of battle. And for what had they died? Not indeed for the glory of their country, nor in the pursuit of science, not yet for their own advantage; but to place a stranger on the throne of a strange kingdom. Yet they had fought as brave men will ever fight, to help a woman in distress and right a grievous wrong; and they had not died in vain. From the hour when the first shot was fired against the walls of Sancta Maria to that last bloody day, when more than two hundred died in the embrasures of our fortress, the throne of the Lady Thora had been in their keeping, and they had kept it well. It was with their

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labour and with their lives that the foundations of a new kingdom had been wrought and set in place.

Yet it was no time for melancholy thoughts such as these. There before us in the white light of the moon lay the goal of every man's ambitions. For some the crowning victory of the war. For others the fulfilled hope of many years—the discovery of the North Pole. It was a striking scene. The great plain of ice, dotted with crawling specks of humanity. In the distance a ring of broken floes, the only remaining trace of where the first city wall had stood. Beyond that a wilderness of dark objects breaking through the crust of ice—towers, spires, and other tall buildings that had not been totally submerged. Then another line of wall, seven feet in height, though its foundations were thirty yards beneath the ice. Then more scattered islands of stone, but higher and more numerous; then another wall, this time twenty feet in height; then a wide moat of smooth unbroken ice; and lastly the castle itself, dark and silent, like some monument reared to the memory of a dead city. I have looked on many scenes of desolation in my life, Cordeaux; on long miles of burning sand, on wastes of sea and granite rock, on interminable fields of ice and snow; but I do not think anything has appeared to me more desolate than the ice-bound and ice-buried city of Avranches. It was not merely that it was dark, and motionless, and silent, but that it did itself seem to be the tomb of all light, and life, and sound.

We reached the ice blocks which marked the line of the outer wall without hindrance or interruption. We were more than a bowshot from the castle, but death might have lurked behind every piece of masonry that jutted out from the ice, and we were glad to reach the shelter of the jagged floes. Some of them were over four feet in thickness, and we had considerable difficulty in getting our gun through the barrier.

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We moved towards the next wall with every sense on the alert. It formed a perfect fortification for either a defending or attacking force, and it seemed hardly likely that the enemy would allow us to occupy it without opposition. Yet such was the case. We passed a few dead bodies glued to the surface of the ice by frozen pools of blood, but no living soul stirred to oppose us. Even in the castle itself there was no sign of life. Not a single figure was silhouetted against the moonlit sky, and not a single light gleamed from its long rows of windows and loopholes. The silence was suspicious. Under the shelter of the stonework we extended our lines so as to surround the whole wall. Yet no one saw or heard anything to report.

We waited for an hour. Then Count Guy saw that the cold was only inflaming the impatient spirits of our men, and the advance continued. The water was now lower in the town, and our path more difficult. We moved among the tops of the houses, which formed dwarfed streets in all directions. The terrible nature of the catastrophe I had conceived stood naked in the moonlight. Blocks of ice hanging through the windows; floors of ice; long icicles festooned from the walls; household goods welded and frozen together into shapeless blocks; here and there a dead body, white and rigid, still preserved by the frost, and cased in a tomb of ice. It was terrible to look upon. I saw the face of a woman peering up through the glassy surface, and could read a curse on her half-opened lips. A little further on a child stared up at me with eyes of piteous terror. One of its tiny hands still grasped a rudely-fashioned toy. I gave thanks to heaven that the Princess was not there to see the cost of her victory.

We reached the third wall without opposition, and still there was no sign of life from the castle. We were now about one hundred yards from the main entrance, and it

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was impossible to suppose that our approach had gone unnoticed. Either the place was deserted, or else some great surprise was in store for us. Our leader took the latter view, and laid his plan accordingly.

This third wall, owing to the upward slope of the town, rose at least twenty feet above the ice. It was nearly ten yards in width, and very similar in character to the forts of Sancta Maria. We scaled it with the aid of rope ladders, and managed with considerable difficulty to haul up the gun after us. This we trained on the main gate of the castle. The parapets were over four feet in height, and afforded ample protection for the gunners. Nothing lay between us and the entrance but a smooth sheet of ice. When all our men had scaled the wall, and were ready with strung bows and loaded rifles, we fired point blank at the gate.

The shell, which was exploded by a percussion fuse, burst right against the massive oak and iron, and small fragments of it came rattling back against the parapet. It was evident that we should be able to make short work of the gate without the use of dynamite. It was a doll's affair compared to the great entrance of Sancta Maria, where the iron alone was four inches in thickness. We waited a minute for some response, but there was no sound save the faint crackling of the ice in all directions. The smoke drifted away in the moonlight like a silver cloud, and we saw a gaping hole some two feet square. But no one moved along the castle walls, and no lights flashed from the long lines of loopholes. Either the place was deserted, or else the defenders were exercising considerable self-restraint. We fired again and again, till every inch of the gate was demolished, and the entrance was a mere heap of wood and stone and iron. The fragments of the last two or three shells rattled on the far side of the courtyard. Still there was no answer.

Then the word was given to advance. Our sailors

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slipped over the edge of the parapet like monkeys, dropped on to the ice, and raced across the slippery surface to the gate. I was well among the first of them; for I have, as you know, been something of a runner in my day. I had, moreover, no rifle to carry, and my hands were free. The repeated shocks of the exploding shells had cracked and split the ice in all directions, and it groaned and moved under our feet. But it stood firm till we reached the edge. Then we splashed up to our knees in water, and reached the gate. Captain Edwards, of the *Sveltholm*, was first through the entrance, and I followed him, revolver in hand; for if the enemy had any surprise waiting for us, now was the time for it. But we encountered nothing. The courtyard was empty, and the moonlight fell on nothing but walls and towers of stone.

Thorlassen and I had decided that the great donjon keep of the castle was as near as possible the exact location of the North Pole; and it was agreed to treat it as such until fresh observations could be made in the summer from the place itself. We only paused for a second, in expectancy of a sudden sleet of arrows or a fierce rush of steel-clad knights. Then we tore across the courtyard to the door of the keep. I reached it first by a foot, and grasping the handle turned round to the others.

"Is it mine?" I gasped.

"It is yours," they cried. "Three cheers for the Silex Expedition." They shouted lustily, and I fumbled round my waist for something I had brought with me. I untied it and waved it in the moonlight. It was a small Union Jack. Again they roared out their cheers; and the Asturnians, who were now crowding up in the rear, cried heartily for Count Guy and the Princess. They knew nothing of the emblem before their eyes, save that it was the standard of those who had set their leader on his throne. The courtyard was full of men; the air flashed

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with swords and lances, and there was a scene of wild enthusiasm. Avranches was in our hands, and our feet on the North Pole itself.

Then, suddenly, a clear light gleamed out from the window in the tower, and a great silence fell upon the throng, and every eye was turned to that patch of yellow, forty feet above the ground. A few moments later we heard a peal of hearty laughter, the clink of glasses, and the faint clash of steel. Then there was a louder burst of laughter, and then silence.

CHAPTER XXXI

CHARLES THE RED

I PRESSED my shoulder against the door and it swung slowly backwards, revealing nothing but darkness. Someone thrust a torch into my hand, and I saw a wide bare chamber and a narrow flight of stone steps disappearing in the gloom above. They jutted out from the interior wall of the keep, and were without a rail of any kind. A single man at the top of them could have held his own against a hundred swordsmen, though one good shot from a bow or a rifle would have brought him crashing down on to the floor below. It was a nasty place to climb in single file, and there was at least one living man to give us welcome when we reached the summit. I hesitated a moment at the foot of the stairs, peering into the blackness. A tall figure in armour pushed through the crowd of sailors behind me and came to my side. It was Sir Thule de Brie.

"This is my business," he said abruptly. "I have a long account to settle. If there is any living soul in this tower, it is Charles the Red; for no one else would stay to meet us. I have waited for six years to meet him face to face. I have much to avenge."

"I, too, have wrongs to avenge," I answered, placing my foot on the first step, and holding the torch above my head.

For answer, Sir Thule took me by the arm, and, swinging me back, snatched the torch from my hand. "I ask your pardon, Sir Edward," he said, "but you do not know

Charles the Red

what man you have to meet—nor do you know this castle as I do,” and he began to mount the steps with his eyes fixed upwards, and his right hand grasping his sword.

I was annoyed, for no one likes to be thrust from the post of honour; but in my heart I knew that he had acted rightly. He was best fitted to take the lead, and no one save the Princess herself had more to avenge than Sir Thule de Brie.

I followed him up the stone steps, my revolver in my right hand, and my left touching the rugged wall of stone. The steps were hardly three feet in width, and we could only advance in single file. Behind me came Captain Edwards, then half a dozen sailors, rifle in hand. Count Guy of Marmorel watched us with a grim smile. He, at any rate, had no burning desire to meet his former master.

We filed up the narrow staircase till we were thirty feet above the ground. The light from Sir Thule de Brie's torch fell now on an open door at the top of the stairs. A single strong man in that doorway could have sent the long line of us crashing to the earth like a row of ninepins, but the doorway was empty. I began to wonder if there was really anyone in the tower at all, and if the light and the sounds of laughter had not been due to some supernatural agency.

I passed into a low vaulted passage with a sigh of relief. I had no fancy for that crazy staircase of stone, and am not ashamed to confess that I prefer to meet an enemy on level ground.

The passage was about twenty feet in length, and I could see a bright light shining from underneath a door at the end of it. We paused for a few seconds, and again I heard the sound of laughter and the clink of glasses and the faint clash of steel. Sir Thule de Brie moved forward quickly and flung open the door. A strange sight lay before our eyes, as we paused at the entrance.

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The room was a large one, and could not have been less than forty feet square. A dozen great oil lamps flared round the walls. In the centre of the stone floor there was a long oak table. It was laden with every delicacy that Asturnia could produce, and covered with jewelled goblets of gold and steel and silver, which sparkled in the flickering light. The room was horribly cold, and the reason was not far to seek. Great ice blocks were piled round all sides of it, and they glittered like a crystal wall. At the head of the table, in a large oaken throne, sat Charles XV. of Asturnia, his long copper-coloured beard sweeping down to the golden plate in front of him. It was his grim fancy to have his armour painted crimson, and he looked like some huge stain of blood against the white ice behind him. His size and physical strength were enormous. I noticed that one side of his helmet was torn into a jagged hole, that half his red plume was shorn away, and that his armour was scarred with a hundred cuts and dents. His evil face was terrible to look upon, and I could well believe the stories I had heard of his atrocious cruelty.

On either side of him sat two tall knights, with their visors down, and rigid as statues of steel. The armour of one was pierced and riddled like a sieve, and it was scarcely possible to believe that any man could have worn it and lived. The other appeared to have gone through the battle unscathed, save that the steel of his cuirass was covered with a bright crimson stain. Both of the knights wore the royal crest—a fox couchant gules—on their helmets, and I had no doubt that they were Counts Ralph and Raoul de Brie, the only surviving sons of the king.

Charles the Red rose to his feet as we advanced across the room, and I could see that he was even taller than Sir Thule de Brie. The other two knights remained motionless, and did not appear to notice our entrance. The king

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held a golden goblet to his lips, drained it, and resumed his seat with a loud laugh. The steel of his great sword crashed on the stone floor, and he struck the oak table with his mailed hand.

"By my faith, cousin," he cried, "I have not seen you for many years, and cannot receive you as I should. This is all that is left of my army," and he pointed to the motionless figures on either side of him.

"The wheel has turned," answered Sir Thule de Brie. "When I last saw you, my Lord Charles, my army was as small as yours is to-day. Do you yield yourself into my hands?"

The Red King rose to his feet and laid his sword on the table before him. "I did not stay here to yield, Sir Thule de Brie," he said in a loud voice. "I could have fled across the ice with the curs who followed me. I stayed here to fight—for a last good fight, Sir Thule de Brie."

"You shall have it," Sir Thule de Brie replied; then turning to the men who were crowding in the doorway: "There is no need for you here. But tell Count Guy of Marmorel and Sir Hugh de la Perche that the king desires their presence." The men left the room.

"Three men to three, I suppose," he continued; "but your companions—your sons—they do not seem eager for the combat."

"One will suffice at present," the king answered with a horrible grin; "whoever wishes to do battle with my sons must go to heaven or hell," and leaning forward he raised the visors of the two knights. Their faces were white and drawn with death, their eyes wide open and staring. The cheek of one was crossed with a dull red gash. I saw at a glance the meaning of the wall of ice.

We were both silent with pity and horror. The king's face was terrible to look upon. He gazed at his two sons, as though he were trying to draw back the life that had left their bodies, glancing from one to the other with

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fierce looks of passionate love. Then he suddenly sank back in his chair with a crash, and buried his face in his hands.

"Yield, my Lord Charles," said Sir Thule de Brie. "This is no place to fight—in the presence of your dead children." The voice roused the king as though he had been stung by a scorpion. He rose to his feet, and shook his sword across the table.

"This is the place, Sir Thule de Brie," he cried. "By the side of their dead bodies. I have waited for this. I have not waited for life. That can be nothing to me now. I have no wish to escape, and the kingdom does not matter now my sons are dead. This is the place, Sir Thule de Brie. I only wait for the man."

With these words he picked up the two dead bodies, one in each arm, and set them against the wall in a far corner. Then he flung himself into the chair and fingered the hilt of his sword.

"I am the man," answered Sir Thule de Brie after a pause; but as he spoke there was a clank of steel in the passage, and Count Guy of Marmorel and Sir Hugh de la Perche entered.

The king turned on them with a face like that of a wild beast, and rose to his feet with such violence that the heavy oak chair went spinning back from the table, and splintered the ice on the wall behind him.

"Ah, Count Guy," he cried, "you come in time to offer your services to your king. On which side are you to-day? When a man has twice turned traitor, and twice abjured his knightly oath, it is hard to tell for whom he is fighting—though it is generally against the weakest side."

Count Guy's face flushed. "You are our prisoner," he answered sternly; "there is no question of fighting now. I am here to accept your sword."

"You shall have it, Count Guy," roared the king. "By



Charles the Red

all the saints you shall have it," and grasping the huge oaken table with both his hands he flung it from his path, and sent food, plates, goblets, and chairs to the ground in one crash of destruction. Then he picked up his sword, swung it once round his head, and strode across to Count Guy of Marmorel.

The Count's sword leapt into the air like a flash of light, but before the two men could meet, Sir Thule de Brie had stepped between.

"I am the man," he said quietly, "and not Count Guy of Marmorel."

"Stand from my path," cried the king. "It is Count Guy who desires my sword." But Sir Thule de Brie did not move, and only swung his weapon idly to and fro before him. Yet, if he had moved, he might have cut the knot of all our difficulties. Count Guy was a great warrior and a leader of men, but the king was more than his match with the sword. I could not understand this interference. The throne was won for the Princess, and only one desire remained in my heart—the death of Count Guy of Marmorel.

But whatever Sir Thule de Brie's personal feelings in the matter were, he stood his ground, and there was a moment's pause. I heard the sound of laughter from the courtyard below, and the wind suddenly began to moan round the tower. It sounded like the forerunner of a storm. Then the king's face worked horribly and he sprang forward.

"Out of my path," he cried hoarsely; "I will glut you with fighting when I have done my work with that traitor. Until then no man shall stand between him and me and live."

"You speak of your conqueror," Sir Thule cried coldly; "you are his prisoner. He is the future king of this country. There is no obligation for him to meet you. He has but to give the word and fifty of his knights will

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fall upon you. He will, however, give you so much grace as to permit me to meet you hand to hand."

"Count Guy permit others to do his fighting?" sneered the king. "But he shall not escape me to-day. He has asked for my sword, and by my Lady of Brabançon, he shall have it through his body. Stand from my path, Sir Thule de Brie."

For answer Sir Thule swung his sword so that the point of it grazed the king's armour. The latter struck back with so sudden and terrific a blow that the knight went staggering two paces backwards. Then they both paused, and again I heard a long low moan of wind round the tower, and the voices of the crowd in the courtyard were suddenly hushed into silence.

But the pause was only for a few seconds. Sir Thule de Brie sprang forward and attacked the king so furiously that I could scarcely note the swift movements of his sword. The room echoed with the grinding clash of steel, and the air seemed full of darting shafts and circles of light. Yet so marvellous was the defence on either side that not a single blow struck home. Thrust, cut, and parry followed each other in bewildering succession. Steel rang against steel in continuous music, and I could see the sparks glinting when blade struck blade. It seemed like an exhibition in a school of arms. Yet I had seen Sir Thule de Brie cut an iron crowbar in two with a single stroke of his sword, and knew that the terrible force of each blow would have driven in the guard of any ordinary man, and beaten him to the ground.

Count Guy of Marmorel watched the fray with a calm face, but I could see the light of battle kindling in his eyes. Much as I loathed the man, I will do him the justice to say that he feared nothing on God's earth, and that the clash of steel was to him the sweetest music in the world. He fingered his sword impatiently, and I could see that his practised eye followed every feint and

Charles the Red

parry of the combat. Perhaps, too, he had other thoughts in his mind, and was calculating the strength of either combatant. If Sir Thule de Brie fell, he would have to meet Charles the Red. If Charles the Red fell—well, as I have said before, Asturnia was hardly large enough to hold Sir Thule de Brie and Count Guy of Marmorel.

I watched the fight with less outward composure than either of the other two knights, to whom such contests were a familiar spectacle. I was fascinated with the gleam and glance of the swords in the flaring lamplight, and could scarcely take my eye from the blades. But every now and then it wandered to the icy wall beyond, to the rigid faces of the dead men watching the combat with wide-open eyes, to the great heap of gold and silver vessels that the king had hurled to the floor, and to the face of Count Guy of Marmorel.

The noise of the fight was like the continuous clang of an anvil, but now and again other sounds would come to my ears. Bursts of laughter and merriment from the courtyard below. The clink and rattle of large bodies of men-at-arms. Triumphant shouts for the Princess and Count Guy. "God save the Queen!" sung by two hundred lusty throats, and then three British cheers. And through all these sounds the loud whistling and shriek of the wind, which appeared to be fast rising into a gale.

Then it seemed to me that I heard another sound, indistinct but persistent—a loud rumbling murmur such as a distant sea makes on a rocky shore, and then the harsh scraping and rasping of something against the castle walls. Count Guy heard it, too, for his eyes glanced swiftly to the window, and he said something to Sir Hugh de la Perche. Then for a moment all the sounds died away, and I could hear nothing but the clash of steel.

The combat was terrific in its intensity. The two figures, one crimson and the other white and gold, moved round and round the room, across it, backward and for-

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ward, beating one another to and fro, hacking and hewing with enough force to beat down a wall of stone. Yet neither faltered nor tired. The fight was almost mechanical in its swiftness and regularity.

Then I began to imagine that the whole room trembled with the shock of the contest, and that I could feel the quiver of the stone floor through my body and beneath my feet. I looked at the walls, and it seemed to me that they vibrated, and that the oil lamps swayed to and fro. A moment later I heard a distant roar like thunder, and saw the sky ablaze through the loopholes, and I fancied that the whole tower was shaken to its foundations.

Count Guy of Marmorel saw these things, too, and for one brief moment the combatants paused and glanced aside. But they fell to with renewed vigour, and for a while I heard nothing but the grinding of their swords, and saw nothing but the flash of steel.

Then, suddenly, I heard loud cries from the courtyard below, and the hurried rush of men; and a moment later I saw Sir Thule de Brie stagger back from the whirling ring of steel, with the blood pouring from his left shoulder. Charles the Red had struck home at last, and his sword was lifted to strike again, when suddenly the whole tower rocked, the ice blocks came glittering and splintering from the walls, there was a roar like the explosion of dynamite, and the floor split between the two men like the sides of a walnut shell.

The crack widened and widened, and I saw that the half of the floor on which the king stood was slowly slanting upwards and backwards; that the walls had cracked wide to the ceiling, and that the whole tower was virtually splitting in two. Our half remained upright, and the other half was falling away from it inch by inch.

The Red King watched the widening gulf between him and his foe, and smiled as he saw Sir Thule sink to the ground in a pool of blood. For a moment he hesitated,

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and I thought he would jump the yawning gulf. But he only drew back from the crumbling edge a pace or two, and raising his sword, hurled it point foremost with all his might at Count Guy of Marmorel. The weapon missed its mark, but it struck Sir Hugh de la Perche with such force that it drove him two feet backward, and pinned his left arm to the oak lintel of the door.

It was the Red King's last blow. Before Sir Hugh's cry of pain had died away, there was a roar of crumbling masonry, a cloud of dust, the flash and flare of falling oil lamps, a glint of splintering ice, and half of the tower flung itself outwards to the ground. I saw two dead bodies sinking out of sight in a shower of stones and mortar and golden cups and chips of ice; and a second later I saw a great crimson form clinging to a cracked wall like a fly. Then the wall parted, and sank, and disappeared, and I heard the shrieks of crushed men, and cries of terror; and above all I heard the roaring of the wind, and the long steady grind of ice against the castle walls.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE WATERS OF DEATH

FOR a moment I was too dazed and deafened by the catastrophe to see or hear anything. Then, as the thick dust whirled away in the gale, I saw the stars shining in the clear heavens. The stone floor had been sliced off into the edge of a precipice, and forty feet below a frenzied throng of men were crouching round a mass of débris with loud cries and the flash of torches.

I could not realise what had happened, but I saw Sir Thule de Brie reddening the stones with his blood, and rushed forward to his assistance. Count Guy was occupied with Sir Hugh de la Perche, who writhed in agony against the doorway, and for a few minutes I had to do my work alone. He rose to his feet, and I quickly removed the armour. The blow must have been a terrific one. It had fortunately alighted on a thick embossed knob of steel, which served both as ornament and protection to the shoulder; but it had bitten clean through it, and an inch into the flesh beneath. I bandaged the wound as best I could with my handkerchief, and the Union Jack which I found in my pocket. Sir Thule laughed at my anxiety. He said it was a mere scratch, as sword cuts went in that country. If it had fallen two inches nearer the neck, where the armour was thinner, it would have cut him down to the heart. As it was, he was highly pleased with himself. No man, so he said, had ever held Charles of Asturnia so long with the sword.

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In the meanwhile, Count Guy had drawn the weapon from Sir Hugh's arm, and between us we helped the two wounded men down the crazy staircase to the ground. The whole building was still quivering as though struck by a succession of blows, and pieces of mortar were still falling from the masonry. The stairs hung slantwise from the wall, and here and there a whole step had disappeared. It was a perilous descent, but we accomplished it, and when we emerged into the open air, a great shout went up from the searching multitude. They had been looking for our dead bodies among the piles of fallen stone.

We worked unceasingly by the torchlight among the débris, for many of those below had been overwhelmed in the fall, and there was a chance of saving some maimed and broken body in which the life was not yet extinct. We found many corpses, and among them that of the Red King, crushed beyond all recognition—a mere mass of crimson armour and flesh. It so chanced that the dead bodies of his two sons had been hurled beside him, and even in death these three were not divided.

When this work was done, we turned to a consideration of our own position. No one seemed to know what had happened. But the evidence of a great upheaval lay before us in the dim glare of the torches. Against the sky stood the jagged outline of half a tower. The walls of the castle were cracked in a hundred places, and leaned out towards the ice. The very ground beneath our feet was scarred with long thin fissures from which faint jets of vapour floated out into the frosty air. Though the sky above us was clear, there was a dull red glow along the southern horizon, and the wind whistled past us with all the force of a gale; and outside the walls there was still that ominous clash and creak of grinding ice. I knew it well. We had heard it often before we reached Grant Land. The frozen surface of the lake had broken, and

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the wind was lashing it into a storm-tossed tumult of ice and foam.

None of the Asturnians seemed to realise what had happened. But at least two of us knew the truth. Captain Thorlassen came to my side and pointed to some distant hills. I watched them, and at first saw nothing but their outline, dimly defined against the starlit sky.

Then I saw a faint red glow on their summits, and a moment later the whole sky flashed crimson and died away again into darkness. I had not spoken idly when I said that for eight hundred years the country had existed by the sufferance of God on the crust of some great volcano.

When the day came, and the great fires flashed out on the circle of hills, we saw that we were indeed on an island, and that we were cut off from the mainland by nearly three miles of leaping waves and crashing ice floes. The peril of the position was apparent to the most ignorant and lighthearted among us. We had, indeed, discovered an enormous stock of provisions, enough to last us with care for a month. The king must have taken all the food he could lay hands on from the wretched inhabitants of the city. But if at the end of that month we had failed to establish communication with our camp, starvation stared us in the face. Even if we had had boats, it would have been impossible to take them through that hell of ice and water. On the other hand, it was possible that the storm and earthquake would subside, and that the water would once more freeze into a solid pathway.

There was, however, a greater and more immediate danger than starvation. The whole country seemed to be in the throes of some great volcanic upheaval. The outlook was sufficiently alarming for those who were in the camp. But they, at any rate, had a refuge in the surrounding country from any great catastrophe, and were almost certain to find firm ground somewhere for their

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feet. But to us, penned up on a small island in the middle of a raging lake of ice and water, the situation was terrible indeed. At any moment the whole castle might come tumbling about our ears, or the rock itself be shattered and sunk beneath the surface of the water.

The wind raged the whole of that day, and a violent snowstorm drove us into such shelter as the castle still provided. It was useless to attempt to signal to our comrades on the shore. It was impossible to see across the courtyard. In any case, it would have been hopeless to ask for assistance. They knew our position, and were no more able to reach us than we were able to reach them. There was no gleam of hope in our gloomy outlook. The earthquake shocks continued, growing more violent and more frequent. Every hour some piece of masonry dropped from the tower, some fresh gap opened in the stonework of the walls. The ground beneath our feet was warm, and we had this at least to be thankful for, as we could find no fuel in the castle except a stock of oil, and we required all that for lighting purposes.

The next day a fresh horror was added to our position. The last great fire in the whole tract of the flooded valley was close to the castle walls. It was placed on a slight eminence, and that alone had hitherto preserved it from extinction. But now it suddenly went out and we were plunged in darkness. We leaned over the wall, and by the light of our torches we could see that the eminence had disappeared. We thought that the ground must have sunk, and that the ice and water pouring into the shaft had put out the flame.

But in less than twenty-four hours we realised the terrible truth. The water was still rising. When we entered the castle it had scarcely reached the walls. It was now a foot deep in the gateway, and a great ice floe was grinding against the broken fragments of the gate. It was possible that the force of the wind was heaping up

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the waters to one end of the lake. It was possible that the heavy snow had swollen the mountain streams. But before a week had passed, we knew that it was neither of these things. The snow had ceased and the wind had died down, but still the water rose inch by inch. We filled in the gateway with a barrier of solid stone and débris, and stopped up every window and loophole, and sat down to face the same fate that we had ordained for our enemies. It was indeed the judgment of heaven.

Then we began to realise the truth of the situation. The dam still held, and something had occurred to raise it above its original level. If we were to be saved, the dam must be blown up with dynamite.

If only we could have communicated with the camp, all might have been well. But all nature seemed to be working against us. No sooner had the wind and snow abated, than a dense fog sprang up which hid us entirely from the mainland. The surface of the lake was neither solid enough to walk on nor liquid enough to float a raft. Both these misfortunes were doubtless due to the great internal heat of the earth.

It seemed strange that those in the camp had not noticed the rising of the water and realised our danger. But they were either too much occupied with the care of their own lives to notice the cause, or else there was no one able to make use of the dynamite and firing apparatus. Captain Thorlassen said that the latter was probably the case. That most of the men we left behind were too ill to move a yard, and he was positive that not one of them could have explained to an Asturnian in his own language the use of an electrical instrument.

But in these conjectures he was mistaken. On the fourteenth day from the death of Charles the Red, a low boom came through the fog, and then another, and still another, until we counted ten reports. We watched the lake anxiously. It had now crawled more than six feet

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up the walls, and in spite of all our efforts, the courtyard was several inches deep in a slush of ice and water. For three hours we watched the surface by the light of a large oil lamp. The result was disappointing. The lake continued to rise.

Hour after hour, and day after day, came the sound of blasting; but the water still crept up the wall. The courtyard was submerged to a depth of ten feet. We were driven to the upper parts of the building. And sloping walls and cracked floors alone stood between us and death. Fortunately, the earthquake shocks had ceased, or I believe the whole fabric must have crumbled to the ground. As it was, there were places in the rooms where no man dared to walk, and stones in the walls that a boy could have pushed into the lake below.

Count Guy of Marmorel, Sir Thule de Brie, and most of the Asturnians remained hopeful. Our dynamite had become a sort of fetish to them, and they were convinced that nothing on earth could withstand it. But we, who had fathomed the limitations of modern science, knew that the most ingenious and powerful device of man is often helpless against the great forces of Nature. The most magnificent piece of machinery that man has devised—a modern battleship—is a toy in the clutch of a tornado. In this case I calculated that there were two thousand pounds of dynamite in the camp, or within reach of it. Used by unskilful and ignorant workmen, it would probably have only the effect of half that amount. Still, it was a formidable weapon. But none of us knew how formidable an adversary it had to meet. No one had seen the gorge of the Pasquerelle since the earthquake had commenced. The blinding snow or dense fog had refused us a single glimpse of the mainland. For aught we knew a million tons of ice might have been heaped up in that ravine, and for aught we knew the very mountains might have toppled across the path of the river, and formed a

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barrier that all the explosives of the world would be powerless to move from its path.

A week passed, and still the sound of blasting continued, and still the water rose outside the wall. At least a hundred of the Asturnians had attempted to escape from the death that was creeping so close to them. In the dense fog they tried to cross the chaos of ice and water, some on foot and some on rude rafts, composed of boards and tables. More than half of them perished within a bow-shot of the walls. Their screams and cries came to us muffled through the mist. Most of them must have died before they had covered half the distance between the castle and the shore. It would have been a foolhardy attempt in the broad sunshine, but in the twofold darkness of night and fog, it was almost certain death. I afterwards learned that a single man reached the mainland. He was insane with terror, and never spoke an intelligible sentence to the day of his death, which occurred a fortnight afterwards.

Before long the lake was within ten feet of the top of the walls. The sound of blasting had ceased, and we felt that we were abandoned to our fate. The accursed fog hung over us like a funeral pall. A single glimpse of the stars, or even the dim shadow of the land, would have put a gleam of hope into my heart. But the cloak of that awful mist and darkness added fresh terrors to death. It was suffocating and overwhelming. A man felt inclined to beat against it with his hands and try to tear it apart. A few feeble oil lamps glowed here and there throughout the castle, but they only served to accentuate the darkness. The oil was running short, and orders were given that lights should only be used where absolutely necessary. The men cowered in groups in the gloom. Wherever there was the faint gleam of a lamp, they clustered thick together like flies. They cursed God, and the man who had led them into this death trap.

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The supply of food still held out, though we were now on half rations. There was no danger of our dying of thirst, and it was quite possible that we could hold out another fortnight. But the water seemed to be rising very rapidly—perhaps the earthquake had opened out fresh springs—and in another week it was only two feet from the parapets. The lowest part of the castle was totally submerged, and we were now crowded together more closely than ever. Not an hour passed without some fatality. Men groping in the darkness stumbled over the edge and vanished through the thin ice. I think some leapt out to death of their own free will, preferring that to the last struggle for existence. We rescued a few, but many never rose to the surface, and it is probable that several perished unnoticed in the blackness of that awful night.

I had no doubt in my own mind that death was only a question of time. I calculated that in three days the water would rise above the battlements, and only leave half of a broken tower for two thousand men to cling to. For myself, I regarded the prospect with a numbed and equable mind. The future held nothing for me but misery, and there was a fierce joy in my heart that Count Guy of Marmorel would also perish, and the Princess be freed from her promise. There would be others to take our places, and she would not be without advisers—Lord Fulk of Brabançon and the Lord of Marmontier, great soldiers both, and wise statesmen. She would attain the desire of her heart and be crowned Queen of Aturnia. But she would pay no price for it but the lives of those who had won it for her.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE TORRENT

ON March 31st five of us stood on one of the towers of the castle; Count Guy of Marmorel, Sir Thule de Brie, Sir Hugh de la Perche, Sir Otto Thorlassen, and myself. The chamber beneath our feet, which we had appropriated for our own private use, was now full of water to the ceiling, and we had been forced to take refuge on the roof. A small lamp flickered in the gloom, but the light was not sufficient for me to see my companions' faces. Their bodies loomed strange and gigantic in the yellow mist. No one spoke, and there was almost complete silence in the castle. Occasionally a muffled voice would come through the fog from some distant wall, or we could hear the faint clash of armour as a man moved on his hands and knees along the flat stone roof. Most of the men were worn out and asleep. But we five, in whose hands lay the direction and management of the whole force, did not dare to close our eyes. Half an hour before, we had held the lamp over the parapet. It was four feet in height, but so deeply castellated that the bottom of the embrasures were but a foot above the place on which we stood. The water was within an inch of these embrasures, and one or two large blocks of ice towered above them.

I leaned over the edge and looked out into the darkness, revolving many things in my mind, as a man will do who has to meet death with no means of resisting it.

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Nothing was visible beyond our own little oasis of yellow light. If any other lamps were lit in the castle, their flames were swallowed up in the blackness. Within that oasis itself all was dim and shadowy.

I turned my eyes towards the place where our camp had stood when we last saw it. For a while I laid aside the selfish thoughts of my own life and death, and wondered how the Princess had fared in this violent outburst of Nature; whether she was well and safe, and—I am not ashamed to say it—whether she had any thoughts of me, and whether she would miss me from the circle of her councillors. Then I took a piece of paper and a pencil from my pocket, and there on the edge of the parapet wrote a few last words to her. I will not tell them to you, Cordeaux, for they were written for her eyes alone. I thought it was just possible that they might reach her if the waters subsided, and if they were found on my body.

When I had finished, I turned round and looked at the others, hoping that I had been unobserved in the gloomy light. To my surprise, I could see their faces plainly. At the same moment the piece of paper in my hand rustled, and I felt a faint breeze against my cheek.

Then, looking shorewards, I saw the darkness swiftly changing to a dull pall of iron-grey. A few moments later it changed again to a faint white haze. Then there came a long gust of wind, and the sea of vapour began to whirl and slit and roll away in all directions. I caught a glimpse of a single star through a gap. A minute afterwards there was a wide white circle in the mist low on the horizon. And then the haze was thinned and scattered in all directions, and we stood in the glorious light of a full moon. I offered silent thanks to heaven. At least, we could have one glimpse of the earth and sky before the end came.

We all crowded to the edge of the battlement, and drank in the scene before us with the eagerness of men who had

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not seen more than a yard in front of them for a month, and who have but little time in which to see anything at all. In less than five minutes every man in the whole castle was awake and on the walls.

It was a strange and terrible sight that was spread out before us in the brilliant moonlight. Death had up to now lurked in the shadows and silence of the fog. Its presence had been felt and heard, but only dimly seen. Now, for the first time, it stood gaunt and naked in the moonlight. A great lake of broken ice and water stretched to the dark circle of the hills beyond. The surface was no longer a sheet of black firm ice, but a treacherous and shifting mass of small floes, and slush, and pools of water. The faint breeze that had risen up moved the floes to and fro, and it was evident that from the castle to the shore there was scarcely a square yard of foothold. Straight before us, and half way up the hills, there was a large cluster of lights. A thin line of them trailed down the slope and moved incessantly. It was evidently our camp, and I could see that it had been moved further up the mountain side.

I looked at it for a few moments, and then turned to inspect our own position. All that was left of the castle lay on the surface of the lake like some strangely-shaped raft, or floating monster of the deep. The broken fragment of the tower was an island by itself. Of the rest of the buildings not a stone was more than three feet above the surface, and in many places the water swished to and fro across the battlements. It somehow reminded me of a sinking ship, or of some great vessel buried in the sand.

The men were huddled together in a dense crowd along the narrow belt of stone. The light seemed to have stirred their sinking hearts to life. They talked and moved eagerly and pointed shorewards. I could see the faces of those nearest to us. They were haggard and

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white in the moonlight, but there was a fierce sparkle in their eyes, as though hope were not yet dead.

Then I turned my eyes to the cause of all our misfortunes—the ravine of the Pasquerelle. I could see at a glance that the outline of the rock had changed. It was certainly very much higher, and the hill to the right of it, instead of sloping down to the gorge, was broken off sharp into a precipice three hundred feet in height. It appeared as though half of the mountain had been sliced away, as a pear might have been sliced with a knife. It was quite clear what had happened. Half of the hill had been cast across the path of the river, and the waters of the lake might yet rise another two hundred feet.

Then Captain Thorlassen came up to me and pointed to the camp.

“Do you see that?” he said, handing me his night glass. I looked, and noticed for the first time a long thin black line running out from the shore about the distance of a mile and a half. At the end of the line two or three lights moved backwards and forwards. I had not perceived this before. Perhaps my thoughts had been too much centred on other things. I realised now that everyone else had observed this peculiar black line, and that everyone was discussing it. I looked carefully through the glasses and handed them back to Captain Thorlassen.

“Well,” I said; “what do you make of it?”

“They have tried to rescue us,” he answered abruptly. “They are still trying—working perhaps night and day. That thin black line is composed of pine trunks. They have been constructing a floating bridge over this quagmire of ice and water, in the hope that they might reach us. The idea was excellent. It is a pity they have been so slow.”

“I will wager that they have done all that men can do,” I replied. As I spoke I heard the faint splash of run-

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ning water, and looking down I saw a small cataract rippling over the edge of the embrasure.

"We shall get our feet wet," Captain Thorlassen said, with a grim smile. "I think the time has come to risk it."

"Risk what?"

"The passage of that ice."

"Impossible," I exclaimed.

"It has been till now. But it is a different matter in the light. Give me a plank, a chair, a table, or anything, and I'll risk it."

Others were going to risk it too. After all, it did not matter in what particular place one was drowned. Every piece of wood in the castle had been carefully removed and preserved. Count Guy had foreseen the time when they might stand between us and death, and had not even allowed them to be used as fuel. These were not enough to go round, and the men began to fight for pieces. The clamour of their voices was deafening, and there was the clash of swords and lances and the report of one or two rifles as the men came to blows.

Then suddenly the whole sky flamed into a roof of fire, and there was silence, and every face was turned up to heaven with blinking eyes. Three seconds later there was a report like the explosion of a thousand tons of dynamite, and a terrific shock threw us on our faces. Hundreds of the men were hurled from the walls, and as I staggered to my feet, I saw their black forms swirled by me in a foaming torrent of ice and water. The surface of the lake had changed into a boiling roaring river. In a second we were up to our waists in water, and borne against the far side of the parapet.

There were some iron rings and stanchions let into the stone, and we clung to them for very life. Small pieces of ice came ringing against our armour like blows from an axe, and beating the breath out of our bodies. If the opposite parapet of the tower had not held, we should

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have been crushed to death. As it was, only the small pieces got through the embrasures, and the larger blocks of ice began to pile against it, and form some sort of protection from the flood. The rest of the castle was swept clean from end to end. The waters sluiced and whirled over it like a mill-race. Writhing and shrieking men went spinning past us like corks. We managed to save five—two of them English sailors—at the risk of our own lives. It was doubtful if we had given them a much longer lease of life. The parapets were two feet thick, of solid stone, mortised with iron; the walls beneath were six feet in thickness, but the strain on them must have been terrific. We saw the broken half of the castle-keep crumble away like a house of cards, and in five minutes our little tower was the only thing that stood above the waters.

Then the whole outline of the sunken castle began to appear black in the moonlight. The water sunk from our waists to our knees, from our knees to our feet, and half dead with the cold and the buffeting, we crawled to the far side of the parapet, where the ice towered six feet above the edge. Before we reached it, the ice wall tottered backwards and crashed into the lake.

We looked over the edge, and saw the water lashing the stone like a whip of steel. The floor trembled beneath our feet, as each block of ice struck the projecting portion of the tower. The surface of the lake was falling rapidly, but no work of human hands could stand this strain for long. One thing alone might save us. The connecting wall with the next tower was twenty feet broad, and ran out for thirty yards straight into the face of the current. So long as that wall held, we were secure. But it was a mere question of time. The tower at the other end went with the first rush of the torrent. And now in the moonlight we could see the ice chipping the wall off foot by foot. It was a race, and our lives were the stake.

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If the water fell below the level of the castle before that line of stone was completely swept away, we should be saved.

We leant over the edge and watched the contest. We were numb with cold, and faint with hunger, for all the food had been carried away. No one spoke. The catastrophe had been so terrible and overwhelming that it was hardly possible to realise it. Of all the men who had set out across the ice to take Avranches there were ten left, and the lives of these ten still hung in the balance.

The water fell rapidly, but still more rapidly, so it seemed, did the end of the wall come nearer and nearer to us. In less than an hour what was left of the castle stood ten feet above the surface. And all that remained of it were the two walls that stood sideways to the stream. The rest had been levelled down as though with a plane. The spires and towers of the city were now beginning to peer out from the flood. Here and there a black speck would rise, grow for a minute, and then vanish as an ice floe sliced it off and hurled it into the water. It was morning now, and the Great Fires began to blaze on the circle of hills, and flood the scene with light.

Then I saw what had happened. A quarter of a mile to the left of the ravine, the solid wall of rock had been split asunder. A new gorge had been formed by some stupendous upheaval of the earth's crust. It was, as far as I could judge, at least two hundred yards in width, and even at this distance I could see the broad river of foam spinning into its darkness, and the spray of its tumultuous waters thrown skywards in a silver cloud. Beyond it a dense wall of smoke and vapour and flame towered up and hid the stars, and I could hear the hissing of mingled fire and water.

Lower the lake sank, and still lower. The ruins of the castle began to rise above the flood—great tangled heaps

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of masonry that no ice could move from their death bed. Here and there dead bodies were jammed among the stones. All round us the city began to rise from its watery grave, and glisten in the light; walls, houses, towers, spires, heaped up with ice and débris, broken, crushed and distorted into mere piles of stone.

At last only ten feet of barrier stood between us and the raging flood. But the floes of ice were growing smaller and further apart, and only three feet of water swept round the castle wall. Inch by inch it sank, till at last the two fragments of the building stood out jagged and gaunt with the foam swirling harmlessly round their ice-wrapped bases. Then the bare rock appeared, and the flood beat upon it in vain. We were saved.

In three hours' time the whole city of Avranches was uncovered to the light. Never have I looked upon a more terrible example of desolation and destruction. Black and silent as the grave, it was literally torn to pieces. Here and there blocks and heaps of ice glittered in the moonlight. The waters still dripped and trickled from every wall. There was not a single outline of a house to be seen. Everything was jagged and broken, as though some giant had crushed the place under his heel. The town had been literally blotted out from the land of Asturnia.

Beyond the outer walls—now a mere heap of masonry—the swelling river rushed sparkling down its course. Beyond that again lay the valley, a plain of mud and stranded ice floes, streaked with small streams, and dotted with shining pools.

I stood there in silence, and looked round me with a heavy heart. Ten of us were alive to boast of the capture of Avranches. The catastrophe that had given us life, had overwhelmed our comrades in one awful grave. Of a truth my conscience cried aloud in the silence, for this had been my work.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE DARKNESS AND THE DAWN

WORN out with cold and hunger and want of sleep, we descended the tower, and made our way through the silent city to the plain. Thorlassen, the two sailors, and I staggered rather than walked, and every climb across a pile of fallen stone made such demands on our strength that we had to rest for a few minutes before we could proceed. Even the enormous physical powers of the Asturnians had felt this long strain of the last month, and the concentrated horrors of the last few hours. Compared to us they were able-bodied men, and they gave us all the assistance in their power. But the life and energy had died out of their great frames, and they moved mechanically. Sir Thule de Brie and Sir Hugh de la Perche still felt the effect of their wounds, and the latter's arm still hung useless by his side.

We were fortunate enough to find one of the bridges still left. It had been shattered by the ice, but we managed to find a foothold on the débris, which had fallen into shallow water, and had been greatly augmented by piles of broken masonry from the walls. As we crossed over to the plain, we saw a great body of men leaving the hillside by the camp and coming towards us, their weapons and armour flashing in the light of the fires.

We struggled on as best we could across the ice-strewn meadows, now stumbling knee-deep through small lakes of water, now crossing long broken ridges of ice on our

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hands and knees, now slipping and sliding over acres of slippery mud. It was a hard task for weary men, but we set our teeth, and the sight of our comrades slowly advancing towards us gave us fresh strength.

In an hour's time they were close to us, and we could distinguish their faces. In their midst was the flutter of a crimson dress. It was the Princess herself, not riding or even borne on a litter, but struggling and stumbling over the broken ground like the meanest of her followers. Lord Fulk of Brabançon and the Lord of Marmon-tier supported her on either side.

As we came up, the whole valley rang with their shouts, and the circle of hills echoed and re-echoed with the sound of their cheering. The Princess came forward, her beautiful face flushed, her silken robes torn and plastered with mud, and her hands outstretched to greet us. We knelt to pay her homage, but she would have none of it. She commanded each man to rise, and clasped him by the hand, uttering broken words of gratitude. Then her feelings overcame her, her lip trembled, and she burst into tears. Count Guy went to her side, and whispered something in her ear. She raised her head proudly and smiled at him through her tears.

"Hail, Queen of Aturnia," he cried in a loud voice, and his dark face flushed with pride. "Charles the Red and his two sons are dead. The remnant of his army are scattered on the hills. The capital of the kingdom is in your hands. On behalf of those few who stand with me, and those many who have died for you, I offer you Avranches."

He pointed his hand to the black mass of ruins on the plain—that mockery of a once fair city—and smiled grimly. The Princess winced with pain, as though he had struck her a blow. The crowd were silent. There was not a man there who had not lost some brother or father or friend. And there were many who looked on

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the wreck of a home, not knowing where their wives and children were to lay their heads.

But the Princess had the spirit of her fathers, and it rose above the weakness and tenderness of her womanhood.

"I thank you, Count Guy of Marmorel," she answered, with uplifted head; "though my heart is sore for the sufferings of this kingdom. I trust I shall live my life so as to reward those who live, and to honour those who have died. The price shall not be paid in vain; and God grant many years of peace and prosperity to this unhappy land. The wives and children of the dead shall be my own care. Avranches shall be rebuilt, so far as my fortune will allow it, at my own expense; nor will I set the crown upon my head till this city has risen once more from its ruins. And may the wrath of God be averted from this unhappy country, and may He suffer me to atone for the misery I have brought upon it. To the day of my death I will try to be not only your queen, but your servant and friend."

Then her courage gave way, and once more she buried her face in her hands.

"Hail to the Queen of Asturnia!" cried Sir Thule de Brie; and the whole mass of men took up the cry and shouted again and again. Then they brought us food and drink, and Captain Bulmer produced a bottle of brandy and cigars. The Princess would not hear of a return being made until we had satisfied our wants, and she brought us food with her own hands. In twenty minutes' time I felt another man; I had eaten heartily, and the blue smoke of a cigar curled from my lips.

Then we returned to the camp, where the rest of our comrades gave us so hearty a welcome that we almost forgot the miseries we had endured. A royal feast was prepared, and the whole place resounded with the sound of laughter and merriment. There was many an aching

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heart in the camp that night, but it was bravely concealed with a smiling face, to welcome the few who had been spared from the general catastrophe. And however much a man might mourn his own loss, he could not but rejoice that Count Guy of Marmorel, Sir Thule de Brie, and Sir Otto Thorlassen had been spared for the future service of their queen.

And many were the tales we heard by the roaring camp fires. They told us how the ground had rocked and crumbled under their feet, and how they had been forced to fly up the mountain-side. How rocks had split and chasms opened up beneath them. How they had watched the water rise, and realising the cause, had gone to the gorge and seen half a mountain piled across it. How day and night they had laboured in the fog with drills and dynamite, and, under the direction of Captain Bulmer, had attempted to blast a tunnel through the débris. How they had nearly succeeded, when the roof caved in, and another hundred lives had been added to the death-roll. How they had then tried to construct a pathway of pine-trunks across the ice and water, and how time after time it had been broken and carried away. And how through all they had never caught a glimpse of the castle, and did not know whether we were victors or prisoners within its walls; nor if we lived, nor even if the building itself had withstood the repeated attacks of earthquakes and ice and water.

Then they described to us the horrors of that night when the earth seemed to have gathered together all her strength for one great convulsion, and had torn the solid wall of rock apart like a man tears a newspaper. They told us how they had watched the thin black island swept clean by the raging flood. How hour after hour they had seen the waters fall, and the remnants of the castle crumble into the waves. How through the telescope they had discerned a few figures on the tower, and knew not if they

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were friend or foe ; and how the Princess had never moved from one spot for six hours, but had stood with a white face, hard and stern, and wet with tears ; and had watched the seething lake as a woman might watch the grave of her lover.

All these things they told us, and many more ; and we realised how it was that men could for a while forget those who had perished in the joy of welcoming the living whom they had thought to be dead.

Tired as I was, I did not sleep much that night. I rested my aching limbs on a couch and watched the moonlight streaming through the door of my tent. My mind, strained to the utmost by a long month of real horrors, was now vibrated by the touch of evils to come. The Princess had paid a terrible price for her kingdom, but she was still in debt, and I knew that she would not go back from her word. Indeed, she would estimate her own sacrifice as a small one compared to that which had been already made. It was even quite possible that she would look upon it as an atonement for what she had brought on her country. But to me, as I lay there tossing through the night, her marriage with Count Guy seemed more horrible than all the slaughter of men and ruin of cities. And the thought was not entirely due to the selfishness of a passionate lover. There was that in Count Guy's face which did not promise happiness for the life of any woman committed to his charge. He was a brave man, an accomplished statesman, a skilful soldier and leader of men, but the very rock of the island was not more hard than his heart. He had shown himself a passionate and devoted lover, but the inward nature of a man will outlive his passion and devotion.

So I lay there in the silence, and in the ingratitude of my heart gave no thanks to God that He had spared my life. The long months of darkness and artificial light had crushed the spirit out of me. They lay over my

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existence like a cloud, and now at this moment they seemed to overwhelm, suffocate, and imprison me. Never had I so felt my loneliness. I was indeed a stranger in a strange land, and with no hope of ever seeing my country again. Most of my comrades were dead. With a thousand of them at my back, I could still have prevented the marriage. But it seemed as though I stood alone in this matter. Sir Thule de Brie, who had better cause than I to hate Count Guy of Marmorel, had twice stepped in to save his enemy from death, and seemed to have sunk all differences in the one object of the campaign. I was alone in my hatred; and as I thought of my loneliness, a terrible thought crept into my brain, and it stung like a viper. I began to whisper to myself that a single hand could cut the thread of a man's life.

I rose from my couch with a cry of horror, and slipping on my clothes, rushed out into the night. Assassin is an ugly word, but it rang in my ears again and again. For assassination was the only possible tool that lay ready to my hand. It would have been a childish waste of time to meet the man in fair and open fight. I leaned over the low parapet of rock and let the cold night air blow on my burning face. I reasoned to myself that any means were justifiable for so good an end. That I should be a martyr giving myself up to certain death for the woman I loved. That my hands would be the chosen weapon of God. No anarchist ever reasoned with more certainty and complacency. Then the shame of my thoughts struck me in the face like a blow, and sent the red blood rushing to my cheek. I remembered that I was an English gentleman, and a knight of Asturnia. I would have given much to have been some desperado, without honour and without shame.

I did not stir from my place for several hours. All through the cold night I stared into the heavens, and across the moonlit plain as though to read some answer

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to the question of my heart. But no answer came to me save from the ruins of Avranches, and I could not read the words aright. At first they spoke of a great sacrifice; of lives laid down, and honour destroyed for the sake of one from whom honour would ask at least as great a gift. Then they whispered of the power and wrath of God, and dangled a phantom before my eyes. Would God himself intervene and stop this unholy alliance, this sordid bartering of the greatest thing on earth—the love of a human heart?

Then the Great Fires burst out upon the hills, and for the first time for many months I saw a long thin line of twilight on the horizon. I had seen it once before—a year ago—the gladdest sight in all the Arctic world. It was the advent of daylight. I drew myself up with fresh hope in my heart. It was an omen of good. With the sun would come new life to this unhappy country, the birth and growth and harvesting of crops, the warmth and gladness of light.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE NEW REGIME

THE next day the Princess Thora was formally proclaimed Queen of Asturnia, and the next fifteen months were spent in ceaseless activity. Before three weeks had passed the Government of the Queen and Count Guy of Marmorel was firmly and swiftly established in the country. A few counts in distant parts of the kingdom rebelled against the new order of things, and gathered to themselves small bodies of desperate men. Count Guy, with admirable tact, exhausted all the resources of diplomacy, and then burnt their castles over their heads. But the knights and nobles, as a whole, flocked willingly to do homage to their new Queen; and even those who had borne arms both against her and her father were received with the utmost courtesy and consideration. I think that perhaps Count Guy would have advocated a few reprisals and a little less kindness. But the Princess was firm on this point, and she showed thereby her fitness to rule her subjects.

But the broad base of her sovereignty was fixed on the love and affection of the common people. This was indeed the foundation stone of her policy. It was for these that her father had died. It was for these that she had battled to regain the throne; and she had given her own self as the price of their freedom. Through everything that had happened they had been first and foremost in her thoughts. The feudal spirit which had survived through eight centuries, was now at last to find an oppo-

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nent in the head of feudalism itself. The Princess had not spent five years in a free country in vain. What the dictates of her own heart had whispered to her was now graven in her mind by what she had seen and heard—by the practical knowledge of what freedom can do for a nation. Her brain had swiftly taken in and assimilated the history of progress. She saw in the feudal system a constant menace to her own throne, a continual source of strife, and an unending persecution of the people. And she had determined that her country should awake from its long sleep, and move forward as the other nations of the world had moved. And she saw with wisdom beyond her years that the first step in this progress was the freedom and happiness of the common people.

With this end in view she immediately set to work to repair some of the havoc she had wrought in the struggle for the throne. Before half the sun had shewn itself above the horizon, large gangs of men were at work upon the ruins of Avranches. Before a week had passed, one hundred thousand of her subjects were labouring in the city. Their white tents dotted the plain, and the mountains echoed with the blows of their stalwart arms. In this she achieved a threefold good. She rebuilt her capital; she put money in the pockets of the common people; and she withdrew practically the whole male population of the country, save those employed in agricultural pursuits, from the authority of their over lords. And she accomplished this without friction, pleading the urgent necessity of the case. But I, who had plumbed some of the depths of her mind, guessed that she had more far-reaching plans in view than the mere reconstruction of a ruined town.

Day by day lines and squares of walls evolved themselves out of chaos. Most of the material was on the spot. It was, to a certain extent, a question of rebuilding heaps and piles of masonry into inhabitable houses. The architects and builders worked with the old plan of the

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city in their hands. The Queen had insisted that, as far as possible, every house should be rebuilt on the place on which it had formerly stood, so that the inhabitants could return to their old homes. And money was not wanting to accomplish this stupendous task. Besides the £820,000 in gold which she had brought from England, the vast treasures, accumulated and wrung out of the nation by generations of kings, were poured out like water. Long vaults in the solid rock beneath the castle were flung open to the sunlight, and the gold and silver and jewels were re-distributed to the source from whence they came. I fancy Count Guy had much to say on this matter. He looked on these treasures as the basis of power in a land where any man could be bought as a soldier; and in this he had the approval of all the governments of Europe. They use their credit for their commerce, and keep their gold for battles. But the Queen's will prevailed. Perhaps she converted the Count to her own ideas of future government. Perhaps he was wise enough to see that the throne would not be secure till the fortress city of Avranches were rebuilt. In any case, the work proceeded with marvellous rapidity, and the cost of it must have been an enormous strain on the royal exchequer.

The subterranean forces of the earth had been silent since the last great convulsion which had opened out a passage for the waters of the lake. From that night there had not been a single tremor of the ground, nor any sign of internal disturbance. The violence of Nature had apparently exhausted itself. The Asturnians regarded it as a tribute to their new Queen; the inauguration of a reign of peace. I was not so contented in my own mind. The fires beneath our feet were like a sleeping giant. They had slept for eight hundred years, and had warmed a frozen island in the north into a land of smiling prosperity. Then their mood had changed, and they had

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risen to destroy the child they had nurtured. Now they had once more sunk to rest. Perhaps they would not wake again for another eight hundred years. Perhaps they were merely dozing, and might any day start from their slumber and fling off their coverlet of earth.

But during these fifteen months the kingdom of Asturnia was allowed both by God and man to recuperate its shattered strength. The crops were sown, and the whole land smiled with corn and foliage. Avranches rose from its ruins, and the population began to return to the shelter of its walls. Close to the edge of the dark gorge of the Pasquerelle, a new fortress had risen white in the sunlight. It bristled with guns, and its fortifications were designed on modern principles. I had found the weak spot in the impregnability of Avranches, and this new castle was there to defend the ravine from any subsequent attempt to dam the river.

The Court had its temporary residence at Sancta Maria, and from the centre of this great castle the threads of a new and just government were spun over all the land. The Queen gathered round her the finest intellects and the most renowned warriors of the kingdom. She did not forget her old friends. Sir Thule de Brie, who was now, after the death of Charles and his two sons, the heir apparent to the throne, was made Count Thule of Sancta Maria, appointed chatelain of the castle and elected Lord President of the Council; a body which, as far as any comparison can be made, resembles our Privy Council and Parliament combined. Count Guy of Marmorel, as the future consort of the Queen, held no office, but he was the head of the military forces of the country, though in a reign of peace this post promised to be a sinecure. Sir Otto Thorlassen was given large estates near Pasquerelle, of which he was appointed the Governor. I was made Commander of the new fortress by the ravine, and this was henceforward to be my home. But, in addition, a

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most delicate and difficult task was entrusted to me—no less a work than the theoretical reconstruction of the laws, taxation, and government of the country, based on the light of modern European experience combined with the practical knowledge of Asturnian requirements. This was to be prepared in the form of a report, and to be submitted first to the Council and then to the approval of the nation. As advisors and coadjutors in the matter, I had Lord Fulk of Brabançon and the Lord of Mar-montier, both men of sound and mature judgment, and with the fullest knowledge of Asturnian law and history.

You can imagine, Cordeaux, that with this task before me, I had little leisure for my own private affairs. Yet during this last year I have found time to write you this narrative, in the hope that some day it may reach your hands. It is possible that I may never see you again, and I should wish you and the world to know the true story of the Silex Expedition, and that I myself was the first to reach the North Pole.*

They have in this country a parchment of marvellous fineness prepared from the skin of some sea bird, and ink of a most excellent quality. Night after night I have covered these sheets with writing, and have now brought the narrative up to the present date. Henceforth, I shall continue it from time to time, putting down, as often as I can find leisure to do so, such events as may interest you. This will enable me to close the story at almost any moment, and leave you as complete a record as possible. I am impelled to do this by no foolish fear of death or disaster; but common sense tells me the uncertainty of life in a land where human existence seems to be held cheap by both Nature and man.

* Since writing this we have made fresh observations, and have discovered that the North Pole cannot be pinned down to a particular spot, but that the end of the axis of the earth varies within a circle one hundred yards in diameter.

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I know that under the circumstances, Cordeaux, you will not smile at any faults of diction you may find in what I have written. You are, I know, a stylist; and unevenly balanced sentences jar on your sensitive ear. But you will take this as a plain tale of fact, told by a man who has seen and heard the things he writes about, and who has endeavoured, however feebly, to convey his own impressions to your mind.

My thoughts are much with you to-night, and have drawn me away from the thread of my own story. I do not know what I would not give to be in my own library, with you in the opposite chair, our cigars well alight, and our conversation on an *Editio Princeps* or a rare volume from the press of Wynkyn de Worde. How long ago those days seem, and in what far-off land were they passed. But I have had much to be thankful for, Cordeaux. I have cast aside the dreams of a scholar for the realities of life. I have harked back to the primeval passions of man. I have gone forward into the finest arena for the strife of human intellects—the world of statecraft and government. I have loved, I have slain, I have sat in councils of state, and have framed the laws of a kingdom.

I think you would hardly know me now; and perhaps would hardly care to do so. Both mind and body have been so toughened and hardened with the blows of circumstances, that my former self seems like a picture of my boyhood.

And yet to-night I cannot keep you from my thoughts, and it seems as though I were for the moment the old Dr. Silex, of Hanbury House, scholar, pedant, and collector of books. Up to now I have avoided all personal intercourse in my narrative. I have told it as an author tells his fiction to the world, not as one friend writes to another. My purpose has been to gain your undivided attention to my story, and not to pain you with personal thoughts of one whom you may look upon

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as dead. But to-night it seems different. The past rises before me, and I have not been able to resist the temptation of adding these few lines to my narrative. If you care to publish this story to the world you can cut them out, for they will be of little interest to any but yourself.*

I am lonely and wretched and homesick to-night, Cordeaux. Perhaps it is that I have a moment's freedom from work; for I have now finished my business of the state and also my formal narrative to you of all that has taken place. At last I have leisure to think, and for the first time for many months my thoughts have wandered to England. It is now 11 p.m., by Greenwich mean time. The sun is still circling round the horizon, and the light is beginning to weary me. From the window of the tower in which I sit, I can see afar off a thin blue line of sea, and beyond that the white glitter of the eternal ice. It is the wall of my prison. But my eye follows still further south, and I see you reading in your study, with the lamp-light on your face; and I can almost smell the scent of the roses coming in from your garden. I tell you, Cordeaux, that if it were not for the woman I love, I would crawl out across the ice and try to make for the mainland, preferring my chance of death to this living tomb.

But enough of this. A trumpet call on the battlements has roused me to my true self again. I am tempted to put my pen through all the words I have written. But on second thoughts I am leaving them. It will do you good to know that for a moment Dr. Silex has been his old self—weak and sentimental.

That trumpet call is the signal for me to go. The troops are gathering in the courtyard, and I can hear the clattering of their arms. We all have to be in Avranches

* *Note by Sir John Cordeaux.*—I have decided to retain these words, as showing in some measure the mind of Dr. Silex.

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to-night, for the Queen enters her fortress home to-morrow, and a week from then she is to be crowned Queen of Asturnia and married to Count Guy of Marmorel.

God bless you, Cordeaux, and keep some memory of me in your heart.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE DAY OF TRIUMPH

JULY 16th.—Six days ago the Court entered Avranches with all the military and civil pomp that a nation could display. It was a day of general rejoicing. The whole population of the town, now restored to their former homes, thronged the streets and filled every available inch of roof or window along the route. The Queen rode a white horse, and she was clothed in a sparkling dress of white and gold. Her beautiful face was flushed with the keen air and the excitement of the moment. In her hands she bore a small golden casket, set with precious gems. It contained all that was mortal of John Silver, the Lord of Argenteuil. She had resolved that his ashes should enter the city in triumph, and that the next day should be set apart for a solemn service to his memory.

By her side rode Count Guy of Marmorel, his dark eyes flashing from face to face as he passed; his steel-clad figure erect upon his horse, and the white plumes of his helmet in the dancing sunlight. A fine figure of a man indeed. Behind them rode Sir Thule de Brie, Lord Fulk of Brabançon, Sir Hugh de la Perche, Sir Otto Thorlasen, myself, and five hundred nobles and knights of the kingdom, with their squires and ladies; a veritable sea of flashing steel, and nodding plumes, and fair faces, and heraldic blazonry. Behind these came the remnant of our little expedition, one hundred and fifty sailors, half of them halt and maimed, a string of grey Maxims and

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fifteen-pounders, and four waggons filled with those still too sick to walk. Behind them again came a long stream of men-at-arms, archers, and spearmen; the great army that had wrested the kingdom from the Red King, shorn of half its original members by death, but to some extent augmented by those who had flocked to the Queen's standard after the fall of Avranches.

As they passed through the gates and along the new-built streets, a roar of welcome rose from the crowd, men fell on their knees and invoked a blessing, women wept and held up their children to see the Queen go past. It was indeed a scene worthy of remembrance—the occupation of a new city born from a pile of shattered ruins, the inauguration of a new era of peace and prosperity, a bridal procession, a march of triumph. Yet to me, who rode in its midst, and watched the faces round me, it was but the hollow mockery of all it seemed. I looked, as it were, into the heart of Count Guy, and only saw the base fulfilment of sordid lust and ambition. I looked into the heart of the Queen, and saw—God knows what I saw, but it was nothing of joy and peace. I looked into the hearts of the knights, and saw pride and insolence, and a mere pandering to the powers that be. And lastly I saw, stepping side by side with the brilliant throng, the long columns of those who had died that this day might come; many of them comrades of mine, and all of them the victims of the lust of power.

But the people saw none of these things. From the depths of despair they had been raised to the heights of hopeful enthusiasm. Their city had risen from a heap of broken masonry to a fair town. Their oppressor was dead. The knights who still scowled haughtily at them from under their visors were held in a grip more powerful than their own. The dawn of liberty was at hand. And she who had done all this, and who was to be the guardian of their rights, was riding through their town to-day to

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take up her residence in their midst. Small wonder that the men cheered and the women wept for very joy.

When the procession had entered the castle, the whole town was given up to feasting and revelry. For the first time for many years the poorer classes had plenty of money in their pockets. The liberal wages paid by the Princess to expedite the rebuilding of Avranches, had enabled a naturally frugal people to put by considerable sums in their leather purses. And they spent it now right royally. The meanest cottage was stocked with food. Huge fires blazed on the hearthstones. The luscious smell of baking meat permeated the darkest and humblest streets. The sound of laughter rang out even from those homes that were still shadowed by death.

The castle itself was a scene of gorgeous splendour. No one under the rank of a knight or his lady was lodged within its walls. The squires and attendants had to find accommodation in the inner circle of the fortifications, and the open ground between this wall and the castle was white with the tents of the Queen's Guard, a body of men recruited from her own private estates, and bound to her by personal and feudal ties. Probably never in the history of Asturnia had so many people of high rank been gathered together in one building. It was an heraldic education to note the devices blazoned on the long lines of shields, which by the custom of the country were hung round the walls of the courtyard. On many of them I saw the lioncels of Anjou, and recognised armorial bearings still borne in England by the great families of Norman descent.

The warlike spectacle of so many steel-clad men and so great an array of swords and lances was heightened by the presence of a host of gorgeously attired ladies. Up to this time I had seen very few of the fair dames and daughters of Asturnia. During the war and the subsequent settlement of the kingdom they had remained in

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their castles; but now they burst forth into the sunlight like butterflies, and flocked to do homage to their new Queen. Her coronation was in truth a triumph for their sex. No woman had reigned in this country for one hundred and fifty years, when Margaret of Brabançon had wrested the sceptre from the hands of a feeble and half-witted brother. It was true that the new Queen was to be married to a consort, but no one who knew her intimately had any doubt that, although her husband might govern the kingdom by the force of arms, she herself would hold the throne through the love of her people.

For six days the festivities continued; banquet followed banquet, and every night some new and splendid entertainment was devised and carried out by Count Guy of Marmorel. Everyone seemed to have given themselves over to pleasure, and thrust aside the serious affairs of life. Tournaments were held in the plain, largess was scattered broadcast to the poor, the troubadours sang a thousand songs praising the beauty and virtues of the new Queen. Everywhere there was the sound of laughter and music. The Queen herself, on the eve of her sacrifice, smiled and jested with the merriest of her courtiers. I watched her closely, and could detect no shadow on her beautiful face.

But to-night, Cordeaux, this night of July 16th, I have crushed the fair outside of the dead sea fruit, and seen the ashes within. Moreover, it has given me a single hour of the fiercest joy a man can have.

About twelve at midnight I went out on the battlements of the castle, and walked along to the very place where we had made our last stand against the furious waters of the flood. Everyone had retired to rest, the last sounds of music and laughter had died away, and the whole building was wrapt in silence. Beneath my feet lay the city sleeping in the broad light of day. Its empty streets glared white in the sunshine. It might have been

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a city of the dead. Not a living being moved in all its broad circle of walls and houses. Not a sound of any description came to my listening ears. It was a scene of singular peace and beauty. One cannot see anything like it in England, where rest only comes with darkness, and the first gleam of light awakens all the toil and tumult of the day.

For myself there was no rest that night, nor could any scene on earth bring peace to my fevered brain. Two days hence my dear lady would be formally crowned Queen of Asturnia, and Count Guy of Marmorel would lead her to the altar. Out there on the plain were the preparations for a grand feast and tourney, transcending in size and magnificence anything previously witnessed in the country. The long rows of seats and stands covered with scarlet cloth glowed aggressively in the sunlight. A quarter of a mile away from the castle the Great Abbey reared its maimed and patched towers against the sky. It had been found impossible to restore so great a work of art to its former perfection in so short a time. But the workmen had done their best, and it was under that vaulted roof that Count Guy of Marmorel would be made the King Consort of Asturnia. On the donjon keep of the castle, side by side with the standard of the Royal House, floated the ancient arms of the Marmorels. There was nothing wanting to remind me of my pain, and I savagely let the iron sink into my soul, keeping my vigil as though I were some knight on the eve of a great battle.

Then my meditations were broken in upon by the faint sound of an opening door, and some soft slow footsteps along a distant part of the roof. As I listened, they came nearer and then they stopped. I could see nothing, but part of the battlements were hid from observation by a new square tower of great height which overtopped the one on which I stood. For ten minutes there was silence,

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and then there came the sound of a woman sobbing as though her heart would break.

A woman's tears are no concern of mine, and they only played a fitting accompaniment to my thoughts. But a few minutes later there came a sharp cry of terror, and a call for help. I swung myself swiftly off the tower on to the wall below, ran along it for a few yards, passed along the parapet which skirted the base of the new tower, and emerged on the part of the wall which had previously been hidden from my sight. There for a few seconds I saw nothing. Then I caught sight of some white figure gripping the stonework, and there came another cry for help. I dashed to the edge, and caught hold of a pair of white wrists. Beneath me dangled the body of a woman. In her terror and frenzy she was too weak to raise her head, but I saw her hair streaming round her like a golden cloud, and I saw the jewels on her fingers. My heart went cold with terror, for the great ruby of Asturnia was flashing its crimson rays into my face, and I knew who hung there between life and death. But I thrust all thoughts of who it was from my head. All my nerves and strength were required to save her.

Telling her to hold on for a few seconds longer, I loosed her wrists and quick as thought leaned over the edge and gripped her tight under the arms.

"Pull yourself up as much as you can," I said, and I strained my muscles to the utmost. A year of fighting against man and Nature has made a man of me, Cordeaux, and, as you know, my physique afforded the possibilities of development. With a tremendous effort I drew her up till her face was level with my own and her golden hair brushed my cheek. It was no time for thoughts of love, but I confess that my pulse quickened as her lips almost touched my own.

"Put your arms round my neck," I cried, "I have you tight." She did so, and loosening my hold, I caught her

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by the waist, threw all the weight of my body and strength of my limbs backwards, and drew her over the edge. She sank exhausted on to the stone roof, and I stood over her for a minute in silence; all the horror of the moment obliterated with the burning thought that I had held her in my embrace, that her arms had been round my neck, and that her lips had been so close to mine.

I know not what thoughts were in her own mind, but when she raised her head from the stone, and looked me in the eyes, her face was not pale with the terror of what she had escaped, but red with a deep flush of shame and wet with tears.

CHAPTER XXXVII

QUEEN OR WOMAN

JULY 16th (*continued*).—Her embarrassment lasted but a few seconds. I held out my hand and raised her to her feet. She looked at me with questioning eyes. Then she glanced swiftly round the castle. My own eyes followed hers, and I perceived that here under the shelter of the new tower we were free from all observation. This part of the wall was indeed a sort of well between the two towers; and the inside parapet, constructed on some obsolete ideas of fortification, was very high, pierced with loopholes, and had a sort of broad ledge running along its inner side. We looked out on the city below, but were absolutely hidden from the rest of the castle. I was surprised that no one beside myself had heard her cries, but this was probably due to the fact of her position against the wall. As she hung down, her face was close to it, and the stone would deaden the sounds to anyone within the castle.

“God has been doubly good to me,” she said slowly: “He has preserved me from death, and”—then she hesitated. I looked at her inquiringly, and my heart beat very fast indeed. “And by the hands of a trusty friend and servant,” she continued, with her eyes fixed on the ground. “One who will not speak of what he has seen, or tell of what he has done.”

My heart grew cold as ice, and the passion died out of me, as fire dies under a deluge of water.

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"It is the duty of a servant to be silent," I answered coldly; "every well-trained lackey can hold his tongue."

She looked up at me with a pained expression on her face. "Are you angry with me, Sir Edward?" she said. "I am sorry if I have displeased you."

The tenderness in her voice once more sent the blood surging through my veins. The thought that within a few hours I should lose her forever broke down the barrier of my self-restraint. I moved closer to her and caught her hands in mine.

"Angry? Displeased?" I said quickly, in a low voice; "these are no words for one who loves you with all his soul." She drew her hands sharply from my fingers, and shrank back from me. Then she raised herself to her full height and looked me straight in the eyes.

"You forget yourself, Sir Edward," she said. "I am the Queen of Asturnia."

"The Queen," I cried hoarsely; "aye, and the queen of more than this paltry kingdom, but still a woman. It was the woman that made me start on this expedition. It was the woman that drew the hearts of my men after her like a magnet draws splinters of steel. It was the woman that wound Count Guy of Marmorel about her fingers, and made him a traitor to his king. It was a woman that a moment ago hung between life and death, who might even now have been less than the meanest beggar in all the world, and who is yet so thankless to her God that she talks of queens and kingdoms, while she is still trembling on the threshold of life.—Forgive me, forgive me, I do not know what I am saying. I am mad, but you have made me so." And, flinging myself on my knees at her feet, I took one of her hands and kissed it reverently. This time she did not draw it from my clasp.

"Sir Edward," she said quietly, "I was wrong. My rank is nothing. And such as it is, you have given it to me. But the day after to-morrow I am to be the wife of

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Count Guy of Marmorel. Even the meanest beggar in the world might be excused some maidenly pride on the eve of her marriage."

"If she loves the man she is to marry," I said sternly. "If she loves the man she is to marry," and I searched her face with eager eyes.

"Love is not everything," she replied; "if it were so, there would be no marriage the day after to-morrow. I have sold myself for the freedom of my people. I am prepared to carry out the bargain. I am proud enough to offer the price without taint or blemish."

"It is too great a sacrifice," I cried. "Oh, my dear lady, I am nothing to you—nothing. I know how to bear my own pain, for I know that I could be nothing to you. I have borne it in silence till now. But the sight of you so near to death has wrought me up to so great a tumult that my lips have opened. I would my tongue had been bitten out before I spoke. But, having spoken, I will say all that lies in my heart. I do not plead for myself. Have I not said that I am nothing? I only plead for you to save yourself from a life of misery."

"To break my word?"

"I know this Count Guy of Marmorel," I continued. "A brave man, but hard as the rocks of this island. He will break your heart. He will break your heart."

"I have pledged my troth to him."

"It is worse than the mere sale of an innocent girl to a man hardened in vice and cruelty," I continued. "This man should be your bitterest foe. He dashed your father from his throne, he accomplished his death; for aught I know, he may have slain him with his own hand."

"Even if it were so," she answered, "I have concluded the bargain with open eyes. I shall be satisfied if my price has not been paid in vain. I ask no more than this." She turned round and pointed to the silent city, and the fair valley with its golden corn, and the ring

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of mountains beyond, shutting out miles and miles of fertile country from our view. The sunlight gilded it all so that field and tree, wall and tower, rock and stream glowed like some scene from fairyland.

"My country," she said simply; "there is not an acre of it that is not dear to me. Not a peasant toiling in its fields whose liberty I would not give all to purchase. How much has been given for me; how many lives, how many ruined homes. And how little I have to give. Do you ask me to shrink from the giving?" and she turned upon me with an almost fierce look in her eyes.

"Your happiness is dearer to me than a thousand kingdoms," I cried. "I would the earthquake had sunk this accursed land under the sea, so long as it left us two free to do what we desire."

"You speak of Asturnia," she answered in a cold, even voice; "the country that means so much to me, and—and you are mistaken—if you think—that I am not free to do as I desire." I looked her in the face, and she lowered her eyes to the ground. Her cheeks flamed crimson in the sunlight, and her two hands were pressed closely to her breast. I moved a step nearer to her.

"Lady Thora," I said quietly, "it is a waste of time to argue with me. You have only to say, 'I do not desire your presence; even if I were a poor woman, I would not stop to speak to you.' Why waste time in defending your actions to one who has no right to judge them?"

For answer she walked away to the edge of the parapet and buried her face in her hands. I followed her, and she turned on me with flashing eyes in which the tears still sparkled.

"How dare you?" she cried. "Oh, my God, why do you speak to me like this? Have you no sense of honour, no spark of manhood left in you? If you come a step nearer to me, I will throw myself from the battlements.

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It will not be the first time the thought has been in my mind."

"Not the first time?" I gasped, recalling how I had found her. "You do not mean——"

"I mean that already I have stood on the edge in hesitation. Half swaying in my mind, I leant outwards. Repenting, I drew back, but too late. I slipped; grasped the air; falling, caught the stone; and too late repented of my wickedness. From that moment till you came, I lived my whole life through. The vile desertion of my duty flamed before my eyes as I looked up to heaven, and cried to it. I prayed, and my prayer was answered. What do you think could turn me from my duty now?"

I stood in silence, too horrified at what she had told me, to make any reply. Love, duty, empire shrank away into nothing before this one awful reality—that a young girl had contemplated death rather than endure the life that lay before her. Only the single thought that she was deserting her defenceless people had altered her purpose. I saw the whole truth, and in a flash her secret heart had been laid bare to me. I had misjudged her. I knew that she regarded Count Guy with indifference, if not with absolute aversion. But I had not dreamt of such a misery as this. During the past week she had smiled on her courtiers, and borne herself as a proud and triumphant queen. Now I knew the truth, and my heart was so overwhelmed with fear and grief that I could not say a word to comfort her in her sorrow or dissuade her from her purpose.

"My dear lady," I said brokenly, "my dear lady—if only I could help you—if you would only let me help you. Surely there is a way."

She came slowly towards me from the parapet. "There is only one way," she said, "and God mercifully stood in my path."

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Swiftly my mind went back to that night when I had wrestled with my own evil thoughts by the battlement of the camp, and my hand instinctively moved to the revolver at my side.

"There is another way," I said slowly and deliberately, and the feel of the butt in my fingers seemed to give me strength and hope. She must have seen the movement of my hand, and divined my thoughts, for a look of horror crossed her face, and she shrank from me, as one would shrink from some loathsome reptile.

"You would die yourself," I said in a reproachful voice, "yet you would not let one who loves you die on your behalf."

"Not die in dishonour," she replied. "Sir Edward, I have read your thoughts. You are too old a friend to mind plain words. What you meditated would set me free and lift the burden off my life. Yet I tell you that I would rather see you dead at my feet than that you should do this thing."

I flushed with shame, but murder was in my heart; and if I could have torn myself away from the spot, no fear of death or dishonour nor even the hatred of her I loved would have stayed my hand. But the sorrowful and noble expression of her face held me like an iron chain, and beneath her glance I saw myself as vile a thing as ever crawled this earth. I averted my eyes, feeling that I was not fit to look upon the woman I loved. Then the bitterness of my passion stung me to speech.

"I will meet Count Guy of Marmorel to-morrow in fair and open field," I said. "I have made up my mind that he must die—and die to-morrow before he chains you to his life. It was not because I feared him that the vile thought of murder came to me. It was rather that I might make the result more certain. But you shall see with your own eyes that I do not fear him."

"He will not fight you."

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"He shall, or I will shoot him like I would a dangerous beast."

"If he does fight you, the result is certain."

"The result is in the hands of God," I replied. "Strength of purpose has nerved many a weak arm before now. I am not afraid. My dearest lady, I will leave you. I have told you the secret of my heart, and I ask your forgiveness for having done so. My only wish is for your happiness. It has always been so since I first met you. I ask you to remember this, however great my offence has been." I came up to her, and raising her hand to my lips, kissed it fervently. Her fingers were cold as ice, and she did not speak. Then I raised my eyes and looked at her. Her head was bowed, and I saw nothing but the crown of her golden hair. I loosed her hand, and turning away from her, strode towards the place from whence I had come. As I reached the corner where the narrow ledge ran past the new tower, I looked round, and saw that her hands were pressed to her face, and that her whole frame was shaken with sobs. In a flash I turned sharply on my heel and recrossed the wall. Before I had covered half the distance she looked up and I stopped, not daring to gaze in her face for fear of what I might see in her tear-stained features. She came quietly to my side, and laid her hand on my arm.

"Promise me you will not fight Count Guy to-morrow," she said in a low voice. I was silent and still was afraid to look upon her face.

"If you fight him," she continued, "you will die. There is not his equal in this kingdom—save one. Your efforts will be useless, and—I shall lose a friend. I have not many of them."

"Many have died in your cause," I answered, still not raising my eyes, "one more or less will scarcely matter." And as I spoke, I despised myself, for I had made a wild

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guess at the truth, and was only trying to confirm the hopes and fancies in my brain.

"Promise me you will not fight," she repeated, almost pitifully.

"I have only your happiness at heart," I replied; "your marriage with Count Guy of Marmorel will bring you lifelong misery."

"Promise me you will not fight," she murmured, "and—you will give me all the happiness in your power."

My heart beat like a sledge hammer, the blood rushed to my head so that I could scarcely hear or see. Then I raised my face, and seeing all the glorious truth in her eyes, caught her in my arms and pressed her lips to mine.

She broke away from me with a cry, and buried her face in her hands.

"Is it true?" I cried hoarsely. "Is it true? Oh, my God, is it true? This one moment is the crown of my life. I will wear it till death, though it pierce me like a crown of thorns. My dearest, my queen—my queen," and advancing to her, I would have taken her in my arms again. She stepped back, and holding out her hands to stop my advance, smiled at me through her tears.

"No, no," she cried, "that is over and done with. You know the truth. I would not have told you, except to save your life. It only remains for us to forget. We have much need of courage, you and I. I look to you to help me in the battle."

"I cannot forget," I answered. "Oh, my dearest one, let me take you away from this. Let us hide in some lonely and desolate part of the country. Give up your crown and your kingdom of sorrow, and let us live in happiness. Let us go forth on the eternal ice, and try and reach Europe. A relief expedition cannot be far off now. Will you not give up all for me—and for love?"

"I would give up all," she answered slowly, "for you and for love, if it were not that I have sworn an oath to a dead man, and I will keep it to the bitter end. I would

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give up all, but my path has been marked out for me by God, and I must tread it apart from you. My country and my people claim all that I have to give them."

"Why should you sacrifice yourself?" I cried. "Count Guy would rule this kingdom without you by his side. He is firm in the saddle now. He has risen by your name. He would not care if you left him. He does not love you."

"Count Guy would rule them," she replied, "but their happiness is in my hands. I have my father's work to do. He bequeathed it to me as an inheritance. He died himself for the sake of the work that I must finish. And Count Guy—Count Guy loves me with all his heart and soul."

"Yet, if Count Guy were dead," I whispered. "No, you mistake me, it will not be by my hand. But if he were dead——"

"If Count Guy were dead," she replied slowly; "if Count Guy were dead it would be impossible for me to be your wife, if I remained Count of Aturnia. No one of alien race could share the throne of this country. Not a lord or knight, nor even a peasant in the kingdom would suffer it. Yet, if Count Guy were dead"—she stopped, and I looked eagerly into her face, which glowed with love. Then a feeling of shame swept over me. I could not accept so great a sacrifice as the one she would offer, though but a few moments ago I had asked for it.

"No, dear lady," I cried, "I am not altogether vile and selfish. In a moment of passion I was blind. But now I see what I have asked of you. The love of your country, your hopes and plans for its happiness, your oath to a dead man, your ambition and the better part you have chosen. All these I have asked, that I may break and crumble them, that I may cast them into the fire of passion and consume them to feed my own desire. I am not really so vile a thing as that. Forget that I have for a moment believed myself to be so."

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"Yet, if Count Guy were dead," she murmured, "Count Thule de Brie is still the heir apparent to the throne. He is a just and noble man. If I resigned the throne to him—but why talk of such matters?" and she laughed bitterly.

"There would still be your oath," I said.

"My oath?" she repeated, and again she laughed. Then she flushed red, and clenched her hands. "Why do we talk like fools?" she cried; "this is no time to speculate on the death of another man, still less on the death of the man whose strong arms and keen brain have set me on my throne. Our paths lie apart. I have had to choose between my love and my duty. I have chosen the latter. My dear one, I look to you to help me in this weight of sorrow. I am afraid of temptation. After all, I am but a woman with a woman's heart."

I knelt at her feet and kissed her hand. "I will serve you with all the strength of my body and soul," I replied; "if love is anything more than a thing of earth, anything better than mere possession and happiness. Though my hand may never touch yours again, it will always be near to defend you. Though my lips may never breathe a word in your ear beyond the chatter of a courtier or the advice of a statesman, yet they are always at your service to give you council and uphold your will. I will try to be as brave as you. Good-bye, my dearest one."

I rose to my feet and clasped her to me in one long embrace. Then I left her, with trembling limbs and a heart that burned like the flames of hell.

As I strode along the courtyard to my chamber, I passed the chapel door. It was open, and within I saw the gigantic form of a man kneeling before the altar with a great sword pressed to his lips. The sunlight streamed through the windows and fell on the steel of his armour, and the blazonry of his shield which lay beside him. It was Sir Thule de Brie keeping a lonely vigil with his God.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE COMBAT

JULY 20th.—To-night as I sit down to write to you, Cordeaux, the whole world seems to have shifted from its order and stability, and I myself can hardly yet believe the things that I tell you.

The 17th of this month was the culminating point of a week's brilliant festivities. The following day had been solemnly decreed a day of great pageantry and solemn prayer, and national thanksgiving. But this day was set apart for the lighter and more festive accompaniments of a great ceremonial. At noon the whole population of Avranches were entertained at a gigantic banquet on the plain. Thousands flocked in from the countryside, and were provided for with equal hospitality. More than five hundred acres of land were covered with tables, and the sound of laughter and rejoicing rose up to the sky like the music of a great sea.

After the banquet, a great tourney was held outside the city gate. More than twenty thousand people found seats round the enclosure, and nearly as many thronged the walls of the town. The noblest and most skilful knights of Asturnia displayed their prowess in arms before the assembled multitude, doing battle for the credit of their fair ladies, and for the enhancement of their own reputations in the national pastime of war. These combats, though for the most part fought with the full fury and strength of the combatants, were rendered comparatively

The Combat

harmless by the fact that they used blunted weapons. However, more than one knight was borne senseless from the field, and such was the force of the blows that many helmets were cracked, and the blood flowed from many a broken head.

At three o'clock the *mêlées* and single combats ceased, and a hush of expectation fell on the multitude. It is the custom in Asturnia, as it is in England, for some knight or noble to champion the cause of the sovereign who is about to be crowned, by a challenge to single combat with the sword. In our own peaceful country the challenger's gauntlet has never been picked up from the floor where the champion has hurled it. But I find in the troubled records of Asturnia that in no less than ten instances was the challenge taken up, and that a most deadly combat ensued. I also found that on only one occasion was the champion defeated. Probably the sovereign elect took care that he was represented by the finest swordsman in his kingdom. These battles were no mimic combats with blunted weapons, but were fought with weapons of war, and were fought out to the death.

It is not, therefore, to be wondered that the people looked forward to such an exhibition with an unusual show of interest. There was always a chance of a real battle, and in this particular instance a very good chance indeed, for the throne had been wrested by force from its former sovereign, and there might easily be found some knight to avenge him. But it was well known that Count Guy of Marmorel would himself take the field, and no one could doubt the issue of the combat. The only knights that could have met him with an equal chance of success were ranged on his side. It would have been different, some whispered, if the Red King himself had been alive. That would have been a fight indeed.

At a few minutes past three Count Guy rode into the lists amid the loud and prolonged cheers of the multitude.

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He was clad in a new suit of armour, richly inlaid with gold, and he bore on his shield, as was the custom, not his own device, but the royal arms of Asturnia. His great sword was grasped in his right hand, and it flashed in the sun like a shaft of light. He rode his powerful white horse three times up and down the lists, and each time, as he turned, he cried out in a loud voice, "Doth any man deny the right of the Princess Thora to hold the throne of Asturnia!" and each time the heralds blew a loud blast with the trumpets.

After the third time, he paced slowly to the centre of the lists, and, raising his sword to his lips, he cried out, "If there be any to deny the Princess her rights, I stand here, by the grace of God, to defend them in single combat," and with these words he slung his shield on his saddle bow, and, loosening one of his steel gauntlets, cast it sparkling far into the arena.

For a moment there was silence, then I saw a movement in the crowd at the end of the lists, and heard some shouts of anger and derision. A few seconds later I saw a narrow lane opening out in the dense mass of heads, and at the end of it the tall figure of a knight on horseback moving slowly through the multitude.

All the eyes of that vast throng were now turned toward the spot, and as the rider came out into full view a loud roar of voices went up to heaven, some crying out in mockery, some in the delight of an anticipated combat, some in indignation that any should be found to dispute the rights of their Queen, and even some in fear of what they saw. For the knight was clad in blood red armour from head to foot, and some of the women near to me whispered in awe-struck tones that Charles the Red had returned from his grave to claim the throne again.

The knight, who rode a black horse, carried no armorial bearings of any kind, and as his visor was down, there was no obvious clue to his identity. But as I looked upon

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his enormous bulk, and noticed the straight set of his back, and the almost angular squareness of his shoulders, there came to my mind, like a flash, what I had seen in the chapel the night before, and my heart beat fast with exultation. If it was Count Thule de Brie, he was prepared to risk his life and his good name to save his mistress from the marriage with Count Guy of Marmorel. No man could offer a greater sacrifice than this, for, whether he lived or died, he would be branded as a traitor in the eyes of all Asturnia.

The knight rode slowly towards the glove that sparkled on the ground in the sunlight. Then, lowering his sword and inserting the point in the steel links, he tossed the gauntlet high into the air, and caught it again with his left hand. Count Guy of Marmorel sat on his horse like a statue and watched him with a cold smile on his face, but with the eagerness of battle in his eyes. To this man a keen fight was as the breath of life, and the great size of his opponent gave but a zest to the encounter. But I wondered if he would smile with so much contentment when the red knight raised his visor.

The knight rode close up to the Count and handed him the glove on the point of his sword.

"I come," he cried in a loud voice, so that all might hear, "to deny the right of the Princess Thora to sit on the throne of Asturnia, and to prove my words in single combat."

A great hush fell on all the throng. Owing to the narrowness of the lists the speaker was close to us, and at the sound of his voice I saw the Queen look swiftly round the body of knights and nobles who attended her. I knew for whom she was looking, and as she did not see the face she sought, I saw a red flush come into her cheeks and brow, and she half rose in her seat. But she conquered her emotions, and when I looked again, her face was pale as death.

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Count Guy took the proffered gauntlet, and calmly replaced it on his hand.

"Your name, Sir Knight?" he said courteously.

"I have no name," the knight answered. "I fight not for myself, nor under my own device. If I die, I die unknown. If I live, I depart in peace. Such is the custom of these combats."

Count Guy beckoned the heralds to him and apparently consulted them. Then he turned to his opponent.

"Such appears to be the custom of these combats, Sir Knight," he said, "and though most combatants have been proud to fight under their own names, believing that their cause is just, yet your privacy must be respected, and, doubtless, in this case you have excellent reasons for preserving it."

At these words, spoken in a loud voice, a yell of approval went up from the multitude, and they derisively called on the knight to disclose himself, or they would tear his armour from his back. He sat motionless on his horse, but I could see his steel-covered fingers gripping and ungripping nervously on the hilt of his sword.

Then Count Guy rode up to the great scarlet-covered stand, from whence the Queen and her suite had been watching the proceedings. He bowed, and holding his sword by the blade, stretched out the hilt towards her. She took it with trembling hands, and Lord Fulk of Brabançon whispered something in her ear. For one brief second she looked round with a white and terrified face, and I thought that she was going to fling the weapon into the arena. But she composed herself, and, raising the hilt to her lips, handed the blade back to Count Guy. Yet all the time her eyes were fixed on that silent red figure in the lists, who had no lady to wish him God speed or consecrate his sword.

Count Guy rode back to his place, and the two men faced each other, a bare twenty paces apart. The silence

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of the expectant crowd was so complete that I could hear the faint creaking of the Red Knight's armour, as he slightly raised the point of his sword. Then there was the sudden blare of trumpets, Count Guy dug his spurs into his horse and rode full tilt at his opponent. It was a risky thing to do in a combat with swords, but the Count evidently held his adversary in slight esteem, and hoped to unhorse him with the mere shock.

But though the Red Knight had not been the first to move, he was quick enough to make his horse swerve from the path of the Count, counter a terrible stroke of his sword with a forward parry, and make a second stroke backwards, so far that he appeared to be almost lying back on his horse's hindquarters, and so swiftly that though the Count went past like a flash of lightning the force of the blow beat him on to the crupper of his saddle. If the blow had been struck half a second sooner, or if the Count had been going a shade less fast, the sword must have bit through the armour into the spine.

Sir Hugh de la Perche turned to me with a glow of anger on his face. "Count Thule de Brie," he said in a low voice, lest the Queen should hear. "No other man in the kingdom can make that stroke and parry. Is he mad?"

"Perhaps he is mad," I answered curtly, "or perhaps he is a traitor."

As I spoke, Count Guy reined in his horse, and turned again to meet his opponent. The latter made no attempt to follow up his advantage, but once more waited for an attack to be made on him. The Count advanced slowly this time, till he was within six feet of the Red Knight, and then there passed some words between them which I could not hear. Then, by a sudden movement of his horse, Count Guy brought himself within striking distance and attacked his opponent with such fury and such a rapid succession of blows that it seemed as though noth-

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ing on earth could have stood up against them. The Red Knight replied with equal vigour, and the clashing of steel was so loud and continuous that a blind man would have supposed that at least a dozen men were in the throes of a deadly combat.

In less than five minutes both their shields were hacked into fragments and both their horses lay dead on the ground. They were fighting on foot, grasping their gigantic swords with both hands, and with little protection but the blades themselves. Now and again one of them would partially break through the other's guard. Twice Count Guy of Marmorel was beaten to his knees and twice he recovered himself, and in his turn attacked with so much fury that the grass grew red with his opponent's blood. Both men were horribly gashed and wounded, and Count Guy's armour was nearly as crimson as that of the Red Knight. It was a terrible sight to watch these two magnificent specimens of manhood beating the life out of each other in the sunlight.

Such a combat could not last for long, even between opponents so equally matched. Both were growing weak from loss of blood, and the fury of the battle was enough to exhaust a frame of iron and arms of steel. The Queen rose in her seat with horror on her face, and turning to Lord Fulk implored him to stop the combat.

But, even as she spoke, the end came. Count Guy, by a strange irony of fate, slipped on a piece of grass that was wet with his adversary's blood, and before he could recover his balance, one stroke of the Red Knight's sword sent his weapon spinning into the air, and another cut deep into the side of his helmet. He fell backwards with a crash and lay motionless. The whole multitude rose to their feet with horror-stricken faces. I and several other knights rushed forward to the side of the fallen man. When we had unlaced his helmet, we saw at a glance that

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he was dead. The sword had cut clean through the steel into his brain.

Then there arose an indescribable tumult among the people. As a man, Count Guy had not been popular; but, as a soldier and statesman, he stood high in the estimation of his countrymen, and had always been the idol of his soldiers. There were ominous cries of "Death to the traitor," and the long rattle of steel round the enclosure showed that the soldiers would have to be held in check. But the Red Knight stood motionless, leaning upon his sword, and gazing on the dead man's body. And even as he stood the ground beneath his feet grew red with blood.

The crowd began to pour over the barricades, and I could see the gleam of swords among them. But before they could reach the object of their movement, a thin line of steel-clad knights began to form and extend itself in a circle round Count Guy and the man who had slain him. Then Lord Fulk of Brabançon stepped forward.

"Men of Asturnia," he cried in a loud voice, "this has been a fair fight. Whatever pain or wrath we have in our hearts, our own honour, and our own vows of chivalry give protection to the man who has slain our future king. His only punishment will be that he has wrought this work in vain."

"Not in vain, Lord Fulk," said a faint voice. "Not in vain, thank God," and, leaning on the arm of Sir Hugh de la Perche, the Red Knight staggered through the line of knights and faced the people.

"Unfasten my helmet," he said faintly. They unlaced it, and, taking it off, showed to the astonished multitude the countenance of Count Thule de Brie, white and haggard with pain, but with the indomitable spirit of his race still flashing from his eyes.

"You know now," he said, in short, gasping sentences, "who has slain your future king. There are matters

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between me and the Lord of Marmorel—that could only be settled in this manner. Before the first bout was over he knew the truth. He consented to continue the combat—to risk his life on the result—as I risked mine. The challenge was a farce. I am, as you all know, heir to the throne—but loyal to the Queen. I helped to set her on her throne—and, by the grace of God, I will, if I live—hold it secure for her. Count Guy was the first soldier in the kingdom. He was a brave and honourable man. Yet it had come to this—that either he or I must die. The chances were in his favour. He at least died like a true knight and soldier—in defence of his Queen. If I had died—I should have been buried as an unknown traitor. No man would have known for whom or for what I had died. Count Guy is dead, and may God——”

He suddenly reeled and fell forward with a crash, dragging Sir Hugh de la Perche to the ground with him, and the spectators saw that the grass was crimson with his blood. Quickly and silently they made two litters from the boards of the enclosure to bear Count Thule de Brie and the dead Count of Marmorel from the field. The crowd whispered among themselves in awe-struck tones, but as they opened out a passage for the sad procession, every head was bowed and there was absolute silence, as though they had been at a funeral.

Then all at once in the silence there arose a bitter cry, and I saw the Queen rise with a white face and vacant eyes that seemed to stare at something that I could not see. I turned quickly to go to her side, for I felt somehow that she needed my assistance. But before I could reach her, she fell back senseless into the arms of her attendants.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE IMPOSTOR

JULY 20th (*continued*).—For a whole hour the Queen neither stirred nor opened her eyes, and we were well nigh mad with fear and apprehension for her life. Her face was white as death, and her breathing so faint as to be scarcely perceptible. Several remedies were tried in vain, and the one ship's doctor who was still left to us said that some severe shock had thrown her into a state of coma and that there was the greatest cause for anxiety.

She was moved into one of the apartments of her castle, where only the Archbishop of Avranches, two doctors, and two ladies-in-waiting were permitted entrance. Lord Fulk of Brabançon, Sir Hugh de la Perche, and five other officers of her court, including myself, sat round a table in an antechamber. In another apartment lay the dead body of the last Count of Marmorel, and in yet another Count Thule de Brie, so grievously wounded that his life hung in the balance. Truly a grim sequel to a week of festivity and rejoicing.

My heart was so full of my own secret sorrow that I scarcely heard the conversation of my companions. It was carried on in low undertones, and was evidently not mere chatter to pass the time, but a consideration of the gravest matters of state. Count Thule de Brie was the next heir to the throne, and from time to time I heard his name mentioned. I even heard it suggested that if both he and the Queen recovered, a marriage between

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them would consolidate the interests of the kingdom. Yet this talk of thrones and successions only buzzed in my ears like the murmur of some distant sea. All I could hear clearly was the voice of the woman I loved, crying aloud, "After all I am but a woman, with a woman's heart." The room and the stern faces were shrouded in a mist of tears, and all I could see was that single figure lying motionless on her couch, and that single face with the shadow of Death creeping very near to it.

Every few minutes one of the two doctors would enter the room, and make his report to us. There was little enough to tell. Every remedy known to the Asturnians had been tried in vain, and every device of modern science had proved ineffectual. Hot baths, injections, even electricity, had been tried and had produced no result. At last Dr. Jackson said if no change for the better took place before midnight, he was going to operate on the brain. He warned us, however, to be prepared for the worst.

At nine o'clock a soldier entered the room and said that an old woman desired to see the Queen. She hoped we would graciously permit it. She had nursed the Queen in her childhood, and desired to look once more upon her face. She had, so the man said, travelled from a bed of sickness in the Northern Province, to be present at the Coronation. She could not hope to live long, and only asked this small request. She had heard of the Queen's illness, and thought perhaps she might be of service.

Most of the knights received the request with contempt. The feelings of an old woman were little enough to be considered when the future of a kingdom had to be gravely discussed. But I, full of human love for the unconscious Queen, and recognising in this humble request just the one touch of humanity that was so wanted at this critical hour, persuaded them to accede to the old

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woman's desire. Perhaps, I said, this single link with the past might bridge over the dark gulf which had yawned in the mental life of the Queen. In any case, it was a trivial matter. The presence of the nurse could harm no one. She might even afford assistance to the doctors by detailing the course of the Queen's childish ailments. It was, at least, I argued, but an act of kindness, that the Queen herself would have been the first to approve of.

I so wrought upon them with my words that they consented, and resumed their discussion of affairs of state. How I longed, Cordeaux, for a single word of comfort from someone who knew the deep love of my heart. I felt like a stranger in a strange land. The woman I loved was perhaps dying, yet I was compelled to wait outside her door, and listen to the wisdom of her councillors.

In a few minutes the old woman entered. She was so feeble that she had to be supported by the soldiers who showed her in. She repeated her tale humbly, but with some pride, as one who had nursed two sovereigns, for she had, so she told us, nursed the Queen's father. She said that at the return of the Queen to her kingdom, of which she had vaguely heard in the remoteness of her village, she had longed to see her again. Unfortunately, she had been confined to her bed for the last two years. But she had made a supreme effort. Her son-in-law had assisted her with a little money, and a cart, and so on, and so on.

We summoned the doctor, told him of her request, and she entered the room on his arm. Then the knights resumed their discussion of state affairs, and I relapsed into the depth of my own dark and despairing thoughts. But in less than ten minutes' time, the two doctors burst hastily into the room and said that the Queen was awaking from her stupor. She had already opened her eyes and turned over on her side, and the first flush of life had come back to her face. She had not yet spoken, but was

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looking round the room and apparently trying to collect her thoughts.

We all rose to our feet. The flood of happiness that burst upon me was so great and wonderful that I felt like a man reprieved from death. The others, though they had been calmly and gravely discussing the possibility of her death, showed a most heartfelt joy at her recovery, and it was quite evident that she had been very near to their hearts.

After a minute's conversation with the doctors, we obtained permission to enter the apartment, and be the first to welcome her on her return to consciousness. There was nothing strange in this, for in Asturnia, as in more modern and civilised courts of Europe, audience was frequently granted in the bed-chamber.

We filed in one by one, slowly, as though into the chamber of death. Most of us were clad in armour, and we must have formed an incongruous group in the private chamber of a lady.

Propped up on huge white silken cushions, and covered with a gorgeous counterpane of gold and crimson, embroidered with the royal arms, lay the frail form of the Queen of Asturnia. Her arms, bare almost to the shoulder, lay like the white stems of some water lily on the glittering surface of her bed. The sunlight was on her face, and her glorious hair rippled down the pillow like a shower of gold. Kneeling beside her was the Archbishop of Asturnia, the haughtiest prelate in the kingdom, yet humble enough now, as he returned thanks to God for His mercy. Behind him, in the shadow of the bed curtains, were the forms of three women, and all three of them were kneeling in silent prayer. I felt ashamed. It was as though we had burst into the House of God with the rattle and clink of steel.

The Queen stirred slightly as we stood there with uncovered heads, and her eyes were turned upon us in a

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sort of anxious wonder. There was no gleam of recognition in them, and a cold chill went to my heart. Was it possible that her life had been spared at the expense of her reason?"

"Beloved Queen," said Lord Fulk of Brabançon, "we are here to welcome you back to life and to offer thanks for your recovery," and with these words he sank upon his knees, and we all followed suit, and remained so for the space of a minute. Then we rose, and I noticed that the Queen was still looking round the room in puzzled surprise, as though trying to recall something.

Then she suddenly caught sight of me, and smiled. I had been standing in the background, afraid lest my face might speak too loudly of my thoughts. But at this quick glance of recognition I moved a little forward, and my heart beat fast with a sudden joy.

"Why, Dr. Silex," she said in English, "are you here, too? What has happened?"

"The best thing in the world, my dearest lady," I answered. "You have been restored to life and consciousness."

"But where am I?" she repeated.

"In your castle of Avranches."

"Avranches? Avranches?" she repeated in a puzzled voice. Then she started up straight in her bed. "Of course, yes, Avranches. What a stupid person I am. In Asturnia, with Dr. Silex and Captain Thorlassen and all the rest." She broke into a loud laugh, and leant back again on her pillows.

My companions looked at each other in some uneasiness. With the exception of Sir Otto Thorlassen, they understood but few words of what she had said. But there was no mistaking the strange manner of her looks and voice.

"I have been dreaming," she said quietly in their own language. "I thought I was somewhere else. You will

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pardon me; I remember everything now. I thank you all for your kindness. And Count Thule de Brie? Count Thule de Brie?"

"His life is still in the balance, your Highness," said one of the doctors. "But we have hopes of his recovery."

"Ah!" she said sharply, as though in pain. "His life is in the balance? Look well to that life, my lords. It is perhaps of more value than you think. Dr. Jackson and you, Lavarre, I have no need of you. I am well. But look you to Count Thule de Brie. And you, my Lord Archbishop, I would have you pray by his bedside. Heaven help this country if Count Thule de Brie dies. And you, my lords; I have something to say to you, anon, which will deeply affect the welfare of this kingdom. I would have you leave me for a space with my ladies-in-waiting and this old nurse, with whom I desire some conversation. May I ask you to remain in the ante-chamber till I have attired myself? I desire the Council to be summoned at once."

The doctors protested against her taking so much exertion. But they spoke in vain. I knew not what she had in her mind, but she was quite firm in her resolve to rise from her bed, and hold consultation with the Council of State.

We filed out of the room, leaving her alone with her women. The doctors and the Archbishop made their way to the bedside of Count Thule de Brie. A messenger was despatched to summon the other members of the Council. Lord Fulk of Brabançon, and the rest of the knights stood round the long table, and talked in low voices of what they had seen and heard. It was the common opinion that the great shock of the Count Guy's death, and Count Thule de Brie's danger, had unseated the reason of the Queen. I alone was certain she had spoken with a clear mind, after her first forgetfulness and con-

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fusion, which seemed the natural result of awaking from a long unconsciousness.

For a whole hour we sat in the great antechamber. One by one the other members of the Council dropped in, and took their places at the table. From behind the curtained door there came no sound, though once I thought I heard a woman crying bitterly.

It was close on midnight when the door opened, and the Queen entered with her two attendants. Her face was pale, but illuminated with the light of some great happiness. As she advanced, we all rose to our feet and bowed. She was clothed in a magnificent dress of white and gold, but I noticed with some surprise that she had forgotten the narrow circlet of gold which she generally wore on her head on such occasions.

When she had taken her seat, she motioned to her women to retire, and they went back to the bedchamber.

"My lords," she said in a firm but quiet voice, "I have much to say to you. But the chief substance of it can be said in half-a-dozen words." She paused and looked round at our faces, as though asking for encouragement. I think she found nothing but kindness and admiration.

"What I have to say," she repeated slowly, "can be said in a dozen words. You see before you an impostor, for—I *am not the Princess Thora de Brie of Asturnia.*"

CHAPTER XL

A CONFESSION

J*ULY 20th (continued).*—If a thunderbolt had fallen from heaven and rent the roof above us, and riven the ground under our feet, it would scarcely have caused so much consternation as these few simple words. We looked at each other with half-open lips and questioning eyes, as though each one of us could scarcely believe his senses, and sought some confirmation from his neighbour's face. Lord Fulk of Brabançon smiled, as a man might smile at the harmless babbling of a child. I could read in his expression that he looked upon the statement as the utterance of an overwrought brain.

Sir Hugh de la Perche seemed puzzled and shrugged his shoulders. Sir Otto Thorlassen looked sharply at me and frowned. The Queen alone was calm and unimpassioned. I had but to look at her face to see that she was in the full possession of her senses. She spoke the startling words that burst upon our ears in a quiet and passionless voice that suggested the careful utterance of a judge pronouncing sentence rather than the confession of a distressed woman.

"I see you do not believe me," she continued. "But I will convince you that I am speaking the truth. First, I must tell you that I am Sybil Hartington, and as a child I was the intimate friend of the Princess Thora de Brie. She was my playmate, and so remarkably did we resemble each other that people often took us for twins. She lived with John Silver, known to you as the Lord of Argen-

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teuil, and my father, who resided in an old house in London, and who was engaged in the sale and purchase of old books and other articles, was, I think, the only stranger who ever made friends with this remarkable man. When my father died, he left me to the care of this same John Silver, and made him guardian of my property, which consisted of our house in Silent Square, and a large collection of various articles which had constituted his stock-in-trade. We all moved into the house, and dear old John Silver, for his own amusement, spent vast sums of money in books, that, as far as I can remember, he never tried to sell again.

"For three years we lived in a sort of fairyland, peopled entirely with the men and women of Asturnia. John Silver never talked of anything else, and so much did he tell me, and so often did he tell the tales, that every person of note, every incident of importance, and every feature of the country itself became indelibly impressed on my mind. Before I left England, I could almost have described Count Guy of Marmorel, Sir Thule de Brie, and you yourself, Lord Fulk of Brabançon, as though I had actually met you. I could have drawn a map of the country, and could have found my way unaided from Sancta Maria to Brabançon. Our very games were of Asturnia. We played at being kings and queens, and there, in the heart of London, we held court, and made laws, and ennobled those whom we deemed worthy of the honour. Then, in the spring of 1887, my dear playmate Thora died."

The Princess stopped, and for one brief moment an expression of pain crossed her face. Then she looked up at us, and I could see a tear glistening in her eyes. The memory seemed to have come back to her as fresh and clear as though the event had happened but a week ago.

"Yes," she repeated, "the Princess Thora de Brie died, and for a while it seemed as though the whole

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world had been blotted out from the eyes of John Silver. I myself, who had no hopes or ambitions centred in her bright young life, felt as though a great twilight had fallen over all the earth. No one could help loving her for her sweet nature, her all-embracing sympathy, and the genuine kindness of her dear heart. Yet I think John Silver himself knew that she would never have filled a place of power, and that a crown would only have pierced her head with its many thorns. I thank God to-day that she has been spared what I have seen and suffered. Even in my games, she played the lower, but I think the better part. It was I who directed, and organised, and planned. It was she who obeyed and carried out and endured each childish action with a courtly grace, that could have only come to her through a long line of distinguished ancestors.

"For three months after her death John Silver seemed to have lost all interest in life. Then he suddenly threw his whole heart and soul into my education and amusement. For hours he would talk to me of Asturnia, and endeavour to perfect me in the language, which I already spoke with some fluency.

"Then one day—how well I can recall it now—he was sitting with me in the lumber room, and playing to me on his violin. The sun was streaming through the window on his face, and his eyes were like walls of fire. I could not help looking at them. Then I remember, when I looked away, the whole room seemed to have disappeared, and in its place the castle of Avranches rose from the plain, and around, as far as the eye could reach, there was a great circle of hills."

She stopped again, and glanced nervously at our faces, as though to find out if we believed her. I recalled my own experience in Silent Square, and I resolved to add one more link to the chain she was constructing.

"Extraordinary though this statement may seem," I

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said, "I can myself bear witness to its probability, as I can solemnly swear that I experienced the same strange delusion in the same room, while John Silver was there."

"Thank you, Sir Edward," she said simply; "and now, most noble lords and knights, I will tell you that from the time of this incident I have just related, up to the day of John Silver's death, I actually considered myself to be the Princess Thora of Asturnia, and was fired with so much ambition to regain my kingdom, and better the lot of my subjects, that these two things became the ruling passion of my life. What power held me in its grip I know not. I do not understand to this day—I only know that a few hours before John Silver died I believed myself to be Thora de Brie."

Again she paused, and like a flash there came to my mind the recollection of various incidents and circumstances, for which I had hitherto found no explanation. Her sudden change from a wild-eyed dreamer to a practical woman of the world. The look upon her face when she came out of the chamber of death, and when it seemed as though something new and strange had come into her life. The remark she had made more than once that I did not know all her story. Her hesitation when she told the false history of her life. And, lastly, the trifling incident when she first met Sir Thule de Brie, and apparently did not recognise him, though he had been so intimately connected with the strange adventures of the Princess of Asturnia. All these things were plain to me, if what she said were true, yet I could hardly believe that any woman could have planned and carried out so gigantic a deception.

"If the Lord of Argenteuil had lived," she continued, "it is possible that my delusion would have continued to this day. Under those circumstances, I should merely have been a deluded woman, and no blame would have attached to me for anything I did. But on his deathbed

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John Silver took the spell from my life, and I knew once more that I was Sybil Hartington. And all that I have done since I have done of my own free will; and though I have known much sorrow, and sacrificed many lives, I firmly believe that I have tried to do what was right."

Again she stopped, and the eyes of everyone of us were fixed on her, as though we could find some solution to this strange problem in her face. But she bowed her head and I could only see the red flush on her cheeks as we gazed at her.

"Yes," she continued, raising her face, and looking at us with bright rebellious eyes. "I stand before you a confessed liar; one who has lived a lie, and brought death into thousands of homes. Yet hear me, my lords, and do not judge John Silver and myself as totally deserving of your wrath and contempt. When John Silver was dying, he asked me to do this thing. Remember that this great-souled and high-minded man was dying, and was forced to leave all his dearest hopes and ambitions unfulfilled. He was dying in a strange country, and knew that he would not see his native land again. No one could call his conduct mean or base. The Princess Thora's death had cut the thread of all his schemes, and I, from my remarkable resemblance to the dead child, was placed ready to his hand—a temptation that he could not resist. He sought no personal gain, and only the good of his country. I, at any rate, forgive him the wrong he did me, when he took my will into his hands and moulded it for his own purpose. I swore to him on his deathbed that I would personate the Princess Thora as best I could, and work out the good schemes he had planned for the future of the kingdom; and not leave my place of power till the lawful heir to the throne was one who could be safely trusted to carry out the work I had begun. Such a moment never arrived till yesterday, and to-day I lay bare

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my soul before you." She paused and looked at us defiantly.

"What of Count Thule de Brie," said the Lord of Marmontier; "was he not worthy to sit upon the throne?"

"Count Thule de Brie," she answered, "is worthy to sit on any throne. But he is, as you know, only second cousin of the late king, and until Charles XV. and his sons were dead, was not the heir to the throne. When these died, I would have given all into his hands, if I had then been alone in the matter. But, as you know, complications had then arisen. I was the betrothed bride of Count Guy—God rest his soul—and even Count Thule de Brie would have been powerless to wrest the kingdom from his hands. And so lie followed lie, and the network of deceit made it impossible for me to draw back. I stand before you, my lords, a confessed liar, a woman who deserves no pity for her deceit. Yet I have suffered—my God, how I have suffered. I gave up all for the sake of my oath and the welfare of this kingdom. I sold my body, my love, my very soul, that the people might be free."

She ceased, and burying her face in her hands, sobbed bitterly. We looked at each other, not knowing what to say or do; some of us incredulous, but all with a look of pity on our faces—pity either for her madness, or else for the things she had suffered.

Then Lord Fulk of Brabançon rose to his feet, and leant forward with his great mail-clad hands on the table.

"My Lady of Asturnia," he said gravely. "What you have told us, whether it be true or not, is of so serious a matter to your kingdom, that I for one should not receive it as truth on the unsupported testimonial of a single person, even though that person be the one who has most to lose by such a confession. You have, my dear lady and sovereign, but just returned to us from many hours of unconsciousness, perhaps even from the very

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gate of death itself. I speak with no disrespect, but, knowing from personal experience how faithless a servant the memory of man can be, and how easily disturbed and confused it can become when the body is sick, and the mind disturbed, I shall, as one of your own Council, ask for time to consider the matter, and collect such evidence of your identity as can be found. I speak for myself, not knowing the minds of my companions."

He sat down, and a murmur of approval greeted his speech. The Princess raised her head and smiled.

"Your care, Lord Fulk," she replied, "is reasonable; and such as one might expect and hope for in a member of the Council. By a strange coincidence, I am able to offer you some evidence for your consideration. In my chamber is the woman who, thinking she had nursed me as a child, came here to see me once again before she died. Perhaps you will send for her, and for my ladies-in-waiting, who will bear witness that she speaks her own mind and has no instructions from me in the matter."

The old woman was sent for, and she hobbled into the room, leaning on the arms of the two ladies-in-waiting. She bowed feebly before the Council, and seemed much distressed, for I saw a tear trickling down her flushed cheek. She was given a chair, but the other women stood behind their mistress.

"For how long were you the nurse of the Lady Thora de Brie?" said Lord Fulk.

"For seven years, my lord—almost from the day of her birth."

"There are, I suppose, many who can identify you as Margaret Valoux?"

"Many, my lord. These two ladies," pointing to the Lady Chalisset and the Countess D'Armel, "remember me well."

"Is that so, my ladies?"

"That is so, Lord Fulk," one of them answered.

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"And when you first saw that lady," he said, indicating the Princess, "had you any reason to believe that she was not the Princess Thora de Brie?"

"I had no reason, my lord."

"Do you know who she is?"

"I do not know, my lord; but she is not the Lady Thora de Brie."

"What evidence have you that she is not the Lady Thora de Brie?"

"By her own request, my lord, I examined her. She told me nothing of her purpose, but asked me in jest if there were any marks on her as a child. I told her of these. She said she was anxious to know if they still existed, and asked me to look. I looked, and there were none. Of my own accord, and knowing nothing of her wishes, I said to her that she was not the child I nursed, and was therefore not the Lady Thora de Brie."

"Were these marks such as would remain for life?"

"They were, my lord. Two of them were large moles, and the third a long cut across the ankle. It was done by her father's sword, which she one day pushed off a table on to her foot, and was of such a nature that it would leave a mark for life."

"You have an excellent memory for trifles."

"Things that are trifles, my lord, in the case of an ordinary child, are great events in the memory of one who has nursed a princess. The Court Physician Lavarre attended the wound. He will bear witness that I speak the truth."

"Let Lavarre be sent for," said Lord Fulk, and a knight left the room to give orders to a messenger; "and now, my ladies of Chalisset and D'Armel, I must ask you if this old woman has spoken the truth on two points within your knowledge. Has she examined the Queen, and did she do so without previously knowing that the

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Queen was herself desirous of her imposture being discovered?"

"She examined the Queen," answered the Countess D'Armel, "and knew nothing save what you yourself heard from the Queen when she awakened from her trance. We are also able to bear witness that the marks she describes are not on the Princess."

Lord Fulk continued to examine and cross-examine the nurse until Lavarre entered. On being questioned, he said he well remembered the accident, and that the wound would leave a mark till death. He further stated that he remembered the marks on the back of the Princess, but he seemed offended at so intimate and delicate a question being discussed at a Council of State.

When he had finished, Lord Fulk gave him leave to withdraw, but before he reached the door the Queen called after him, "Your patient, your patient? Have you any news of him for us?"

"He lives, my lady, and I think I may say the scale has turned in his favour." Then he left the room. The face of the Queen was lit with a glad smile, as she turned to the Council, who were still grave with the serious matter before them.

"Do not waste your sadness on me, my lords," she said; "rather rejoice that the one man who is most worthy to rule over this nation may yet be spared to you. The crown of Asturnia will rest more firmly on the helmet of a strong man than on the locks of a foolish girl."

"You speak lightly, my lady," said Lord Fulk, with a tinge of sadness in his voice, "yet less than a day ago we thought that the happiness of this kingdom was more near to your heart than aught else in the world. Was this but part of the deception you say you have practised upon us?"

At these words she buried her face in her hands and was silent. Then she rose quickly to her feet, with

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flashing eyes, and burning cheeks, on which I could see the glistening of tears.

"No, Lord Fulk," she cried passionately. "No, my lords, a thousand times No! I am not one of you by birth, but I have been trained and educated to be one of you. For years I listened daily to the stories of your history. I learnt your language. I studied the customs and manners of your country. I lived in my imagination among you. For months I was made to believe that I was your Queen, and my whole mind and heart were filled with ambition for your good. For the last three years I have wrought and suffered for your happiness. To-day I am one of you, and so long as I live I shall be one of you. I have always loved Asturnia since first I heard its name. And I love it still, and still will work for it, and still own it as the country nearest to my heart. Yet will I stand in no man's place, and will rob no man of his inheritance. I could have held my peace, and ruled by the advice of my councillors, and the grace of God, for the good of this land, but I will no longer act this lie. At last a way of escape has opened up for me, and I will step from my unlawful position. Whatever decision you come to, my lords, I know the truth and shall act accordingly. What I have done, has been done. I have deceived you, not for my own good, but to benefit my people—your people. My acts remain, and the power to further them remains. I further them best by giving the rule into the hands of Count Thule de Brie, in whose mind, perchance by my help, perchance by the influence of that great and wise man, the Lord of Argenteuil, exist the same hopes, the same ambitions and the same scheme of a just and beneficent government, as I myself have dreamed of and battled for. Though of my own free will I resign the rule into the hands of another, I have no regret for what I have done, and no desire to be freed from the burdens of a crown. What I have done

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has brought about the downfall of tyranny, and sent the breath of freedom into the land; and no desire is nearer to my heart than that tyranny should lie for ever dead, and that the breath of freedom should swell into so strong a blast that war and oppression and the strife of kings and nobles and people should be swept for ever from Asturnia.

She ceased, and the sunlight falling through the narrow window, fell on her face in a shaft of gold. She looked like some angel, purified of all earthly desires, and crowned with the glowing fires of heaven. Then she sank back into her chair, and I could see that her face was very white, and that she seemed like the ashes of some exhausted flames. Every eye was rivetted upon her with sorrow and admiration. I know now for a fact, that if she had so wished, some of those in the room would never have breathed a word of her secret to the nation, and would have upheld her claim to the throne against even Count Thule de Brie.

Then Lord Fulk of Brabançon rose slowly from his chair, and I could see that for so hard and rugged a man he was deeply moved.

"My dear lady," he said, "there is much yet to be deliberated on, and much to be weighed and sifted before we release you from that position which both you and we ourselves have sacrificed so much to uphold and maintain. Yet, whether you be the Princess Thora de Brie, or whether you be a stranger, born in a strange land, your name will always be graven in our hearts and in the annals of our country. Whatever your birth, no one is more fitted to rule, or more competent to further the interests of our people. If you be not the Princess Thora, our regret is, not that you filled her place, but that you of your own accord resigned it and told us that which might never have been known. We will leave you, for it is late, and you have risen from a bed of sickness. Perchance it will yet be possible to amalgamate the two interests of the Empire."

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"Aye, aye," they all cried, rising to their feet. A quick flush came into her face, for she knew he hinted at a marriage with Count Thule de Brie.

"It is impossible," she said in a low voice that thrilled every nerve of passion in my body. "My lords, I am tired," and she rose to her feet. One by one we filed past her, and kissed her hand with more than customary reverence. I was the last, and she signalled to me to remain.

When they had all gone, she requested her ladies to go into the ante-chamber, saying she had a message for Count Thule de Brie for my private ear. They left the room and closed the door behind them. We were alone.

"What message, my lady?" I asked in a low voice.

She came close to me and laid her hands on my shoulders. "Tell him," she said very softly, so that I could scarcely hear, "that I love you, and am soon to become your wife."

I took her in my arms, and pressing her body close to me, covered her face with kisses. Yet the whole nation must sorrow for that which gave me the keenest and most passionate joy. After a while, I took her dear face in my two hands and raised her eyes to mine.

"Was it for this," I whispered, "was it for this you gave up your kingdom?" She was silent, and I waited, half in hope, and half in fear for either answer to my question.

"Was it for this?" I said again, drawing her to me till her face was pressed to mine.

"No," she replied faintly, "it was not for this; yet this has given me another—and a better kingdom. Good-night, dear heart."

I left the room, and passing the chamber of Count Thule de Brie, felt the full sting of my unworthiness. This man, heir himself to the whole kingdom, had freely risked his life to save her pain. Yet I had all the glory of heaven and earth, and he—only the kingdom of Asturnia.

CHAPTER XLI

THE BETTER LIFE

DECEMBER 16th.—On the south coast of the island, close to where the Pasquerelle pours out its mingled ice and water into the Great Frozen Sea, there is a low range of hills. They are crowned with larch and fir, and their long lines of wooded slopes form a protection to the fertile valley which stretches inland to within a few miles of Avranches.

On the summit of these hills stands a small house, built of dark grey stone. It is little more than a cottage, yet it is built square and solid to meet the winds that beat about it, and every room in it glows with the light and warmth of home.

It is here, Cordeaux, that I have spent the sweetest and most glorious month of my life; and it is here that I am going to write to you a few more lines before I commit this narrative to the seas which lie between us.

I was married to Sybil Hartington on November 14th, a week after Count Thule de Brie was crowned King of Asturnia. Although every castle in the kingdom was offered to us for our honeymoon, and though I myself had been appointed the Lord of Sancta Maria, the most splendid residence of them all, yet both I and my bride chose the quiet and solitude of this humble cottage, and were only too glad to escape for a while from the barbaric splendours of a feudal home.

Here, attended by a single servant, we have withdrawn ourselves from the world, content for one short month

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to forget everything but our own love and happiness. By our own desire we see no one and receive no news, and for one month Sir Otto Thorlassen has ruled at Sancta Maria and taken upon him the cares and duties of my province. For the present our kingdom is the little cottage in which we dwell, and we rule no one but ourselves. We only ask for rest after the storm and strain of the past three years.

Here we have seen the swift passage of summer into winter, and of day into night. There is a great darkness over all the land, and the grip of ice is closing on the country once more. But our hearts are as full of warmth and light as the small square building that we have made our home. From this little nest perched on the hills we look both east and west over the long stretches of woodland. We look to the south across the frozen plain of ice. We look to the north across the wide valley stretching to the mountains round Avranches. Yet for the time being there comes no voice to us from either north or south. Our thoughts have neither strayed across the great barrier that lies between us and our native land, nor have they turned to that new city in the hills, whose very stones were cemented with our past sufferings.

To-morrow the spell will be broken, and we shall leave our lotus land for the work and anxieties of our new life. There is much yet to be done in Asturnia, and much required from both of us in the doing of it. To-night I take the opportunity of writing you these few words, more in the form of a letter than a narrative.

I have much to tell you, Cordeaux, but can tell you little. By the unwilling consent of the council, and the universal regret of the people, my dear wife resigned her kingdom to Count Thule de Brie, who accepted it with the utmost reluctance. I do not think he would have consented to take the throne at all, if it had not been for Sybil's earnest prayers and entreaties. One afternoon the two were

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closeted together for more than three hours, and even I do not know exactly what took place at the interview. I have never asked her for a detailed account, but I shrewdly suspect that Count Thule de Brie asked his cousin to share his throne with him. I do know, however, that he is resolved to carry out the good work she has begun, and that she still holds the reins of power in her two dear hands.

A great monument of basalt has been reared above the tomb of Count Guy of Marmorel, and the whole nation has done justice to the memory of a man who, whatever his faults and ambitions, has stood out as one of the landmarks of his age. On the monument are inscribed the simple words:

"To the memory of Guy, last Count of Marmorel; a man, and a leader of men."

A new life is opening up before me, Cordeaux, and I do not think I would return to England, even if the return were possible. My life is bound up with that of the woman I love, and she is still at heart the Queen of Asturnia. No European has ever been given so great an opportunity as that which has been given to me—the advancement of a civilised race through eight centuries of progress. The lifting of a country from the darkness of the middle ages to the light of the nineteenth century, the selection of those new ideas and discoveries which have benefited the human race, and the rejection of those which have brought evil in their wake. Never was there such a field in which to plough and plant and reap. A country rich in mineral and vegetable wealth, a people, strong, noble-minded and intelligent. The task before me might appall even the intellect of Lord Bacon, who had made all knowledge his province. It could not be effected in a lifetime, nor yet in a single century. The question of over-population has yet to be dealt with. A long era of peace will bring this difficulty home to us in the next

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generation. It will have to be met with some terrible antidote. Still I can plough, Cordeaux, and perchance my sons will sow, and perchance my grandchildren will reap. It is a great responsibility. But do you think I would leave it for the peace and quiet of my library, for the scent of the roses in my garden, for all the dear scenes of old England, for even a glimpse of your own face and a grasp of your own hand? No, Cordeaux. The woman I have married has endowed me with something of her own strength of purpose, and my place is here.

I have written this long narrative in the hope that it may some day reach your eyes. I have retained a copy, and when leisure permits I shall again make further copies and launch them on their perilous voyage. I have every reason to believe that the current which runs past our coast must eventually find its way to the shores of Spitzbergen. If so, one of these messages may be picked up by some Arctic expedition.

I know that if this account should come to your hand, and you publish it abroad, the whole of Europe and America will redouble their efforts to reach the North Pole. Perchance you yourself may voyage forth to find it. The path is as perilous as ever it was, but the knowledge that a civilised country exists beyond that terrible and cruel barrier of ice may induce men to push farther north on sledges than they have ever dared to go before. We shall welcome the few who survive the ordeal, and you most of all, Cordeaux. But let no man bring the flag of his country with him in the hope he may annex the land for his countrymen. If a hundred thousand men came with guns and rifles, they would only leave their bodies on the northern ice. Before this reaches you, the land will bristle with guns. There is no lack of steel and the materials for gunpowder, and we have more than one man among us who could in time turn out a serviceable weapon. Even with our present stock of guns we could repel an army,

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exhausted by its awful passage across the Pæleocrystic sea, and at the most, only a few of you could come. Those few we shall receive with pleasure, and give them of our hospitality, but perchance no man of them shall return.

And it may so happen that men shall come and find no land at all, and write me down as one who has invented the whole narrative, and curse me as one who has led them to their death. In that hour remember all that I have written, and know that the Island of Asturnia, and its people, and its castles and towns, have been overwhelmed by the Hand of God. The land is but a crust on the surface of a lake of fire, and no man can tell the hour of its destruction.

And now, Cordeaux, farewell. Let the instructions in my will stand as though I were dead. I send you a list of those* men out of our crews who are still alive, that you may carry the news to their relatives. The rest are dead, and for all practical purposes these are dead also.

Farewell, Cordeaux. No words can tell you of my happiness. But if it please God I will shew my gratitude by a life of good works. Darkness is on the land, but the moon is up, and as I write these words, a long white path stretches across the ice as far as the eye can reach. In my fancy it is still a link between us, and I like to think that my whispered words of greeting may travel along it to your ears.

* *Note by Sir John Cordeaux.*—This has been omitted as being of no interest to the general reader.

THE END.

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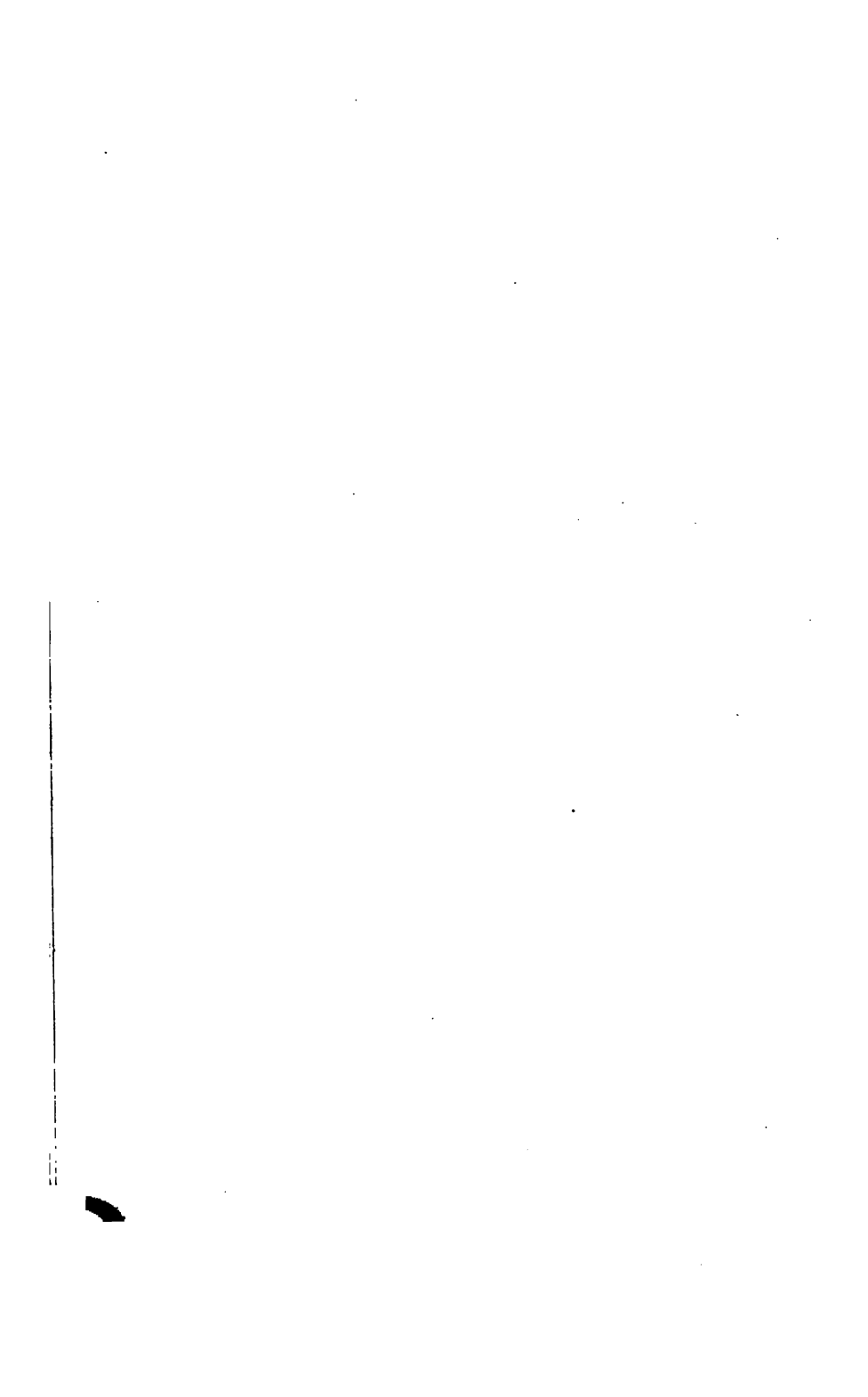
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